Women's Studies as an Energizer of the Humanities in Southern English Departments

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and her friends made them visible to me with their deft and often devastating descriptions. In doing so, they began to teach me all the way back then what is perhaps the most invaluable lesson for a writer of fiction, i.e., the importance of skillful characterization, the novelist's responsibility to make his (her) people live and have their being on the page.

For me, listening in a corner of the kitchen (seen, but not heard, as was the rule back then), it wasn't only what the women talked about, the content; above all, it was their poet's skill with words. They had taken the language imposed upon them and imbued it with their own incisive rhythms and syntax, brought to bear upon it the few African words that had been retained. I was impressed, without being able to define it, by the seemingly effortless way they had mastered the form of story telling. They didn't know it, nor did I at the time, but they were carrying on a tradition as ancient as Africa.

Moreover, all that free-wheeling talk together with the sometimes bawdy jokes and the laughter which often swept the kitchen was, at its deepest level, an affirmation of their own worth; it said they could not be defeated by demeaning jobs and the day spent scrubbing other people's floors. Theirs was the spirit you sense when listening to the blues, to the spiritual, to the driving energy of jazz. They had transcended their condition through the medium of language.

I could understand little of this at the time. The mysterious force I heard resonating behind the words, which held me spellbound, came across mainly as a feeling which entered me not only through my ears but through the pores of my skin to become part of my blood. It sings there to this day. More than any other single factor, that quality, their way with words, helped to shape me as a writer at that unconscious level where it must always begin. That is why the best of my work is really a celebration of them, an acknowledgment of the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me.

Many Black women, like Silla Boyce, worked in munitions factories during World War II. This photograph, reproduced from the Collections of the Library of Congress, shows women welders at the Landers, Frary, and Clark plant in New Britain, Connecticut, in June 1943. Photograph by Gordon Parks.

Women's Studies as an Energizer of the Humanities in Southern English Departments

D. Dean Cantrell

The Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities, in issuing its thirty-one recommendations, noted: "We see our report primarily as a contribution to rethinking the humanities, not as a shopping list." In defining the humanities, among other things, as a "turn of mind" toward history, "the record of what has moved men and women before us to act, believe, and build as they did," the Commission recommends that colleges develop "new materials for teaching the humanities" as a "further means for invigorating [them]." That women's studies may be a legitimate energizer of the sagging humanities seems likely possibility when one realizes that this year at least 20,000 women's studies courses will be taught in American colleges and universities and that more than 350 institutions have already inaugurated formal programs, with over forty awarding graduate degrees. Thus, the putative "male-centered curriculum," which for 345 years has been less than benign to women's concerns, seems to have begun to accommodate this new area of knowledge.

Prior to 1975, English departments in Southern colleges and universities offered far fewer women's studies courses than those located in other geographical areas of the United States. In Who's Who and Where in Women's Studies (1974), thirty-seven Southern institutions

are listed as offering fifty-one courses. In 1975, an independently conducted survey of the senior colleges and universities located in nine Southern states revealed that fifty-one institutions were then offering sixty-five courses taught by fifty-nine faculty members. Most of the courses, however, were listed as special topics, or mini-courses, or interdisciplinary courses not sponsored entirely or at all by English departments; obviously, women's studies was neither a stable nor an integral part of the English curriculum in 1975.

A 1980 survey updating English offerings in colleges and universities in those nine Southern states suggests that English departments are consciously sensing the potential of women's studies as a legitimate way to energize the humanities. Sixty-one percent of the institutions surveyed returned questionnaires, in comparison to 43 percent in 1975. Of the 250 senior institutions surveyed, 154 responded; and of that number, sixty-eight offered women's studies within the English department. If the sample return is representative, the number of English departments in the South offering women's studies courses could conceivably be as high as 110.

Statistics for six of the nine states indicate a rise in women's studies courses in state-owned institutions, whereas only in two states is there a comparable increase on private campuses, and in one state there are no changes in either sector.

A comparison of returns from the same state institutions responding to both the 1980 and the 1975 surveys does not reveal dramatic changes, and the pattern holds true for private institutions.

What the survey shows in terms of actual growth in institutions, courses, and numbers of professors is significant, if not dramatic: seventeen additional institutions, thirty more courses, and at least sixteen more faculty members engaged in teaching women's studies over a five-year period.

An examination of the results further demonstrates that numbers of majors and size of faculty seem not to be significant factors in the survey. For example, departments serving from twenty to fifty English majors may offer women's studies courses as frequently as those serving two or three hundred. Departments of three to five faculty may be as engaged in offering women's studies as those with faculty numbering over 100.

Among private colleges reporting, more often than not, Black and women's colleges are less active in offering women's studies courses in their English departments. Florida and Mississippi, however, report such institutions so engaged. While every English department reporting from Catholic institutions announces at least one women's studies course, Protestant schools report unevenly. English departments in Presbyterian schools are more likely to offer women's studies courses (67 percent of those reporting); Baptist schools are next with 34 percent; Episcopalian, Lutheran, Seventh-Day Adventist, Moravian, Church of the Nazarene, and Church of the Brethren colleges report offering no courses; and 23 percent of the responding English departments of Methodist schools also offer no such courses. Of private colleges, those reporting women's studies courses are mainly independent, nonprofit colleges.

Whereas in 1975 "Southern Literature" was the most frequently mentioned course title, in 1980 "Images of Women in Literature," "Women Writers," "Women Poets," "Women Writers in English and American Literature," "Southern Women Writers" (O'Connor, Welty, Porter, Hellman, McCullers), and "Black Women Writers" are mentioned most. Other titles, such as "Shakespeare's Women," "Other Women's Lives" (films and novels about Indian, African, Chinese, and Japanese women), "Surviving Female," "Woman as Metaphor," "The Goddess in Literature," and "Mothering, Fathering, Nurturing," are singly reported. An impressive gain is registered in that the courses are offered, not as in 1975 under the rubric of mini-courses or special topics, but under the departmental number and title, though, more often than not, irregularly or only once a year.

With respect to the future, the survey shows that eight English departments are planning to add courses—a sizable increase that will mean seventy-six Southern institutions will be offering a minimum of 103 courses taught by over eighty-three faculty, primarily women. Should the departments follow the 1975 pattern, when the number was twice what had been predicted and the number of courses tripled (and if the sample is representative), then the South could conceivably have in the near future as many as 125, or 50 percent, of its English departments offering women's studies courses.

The survey shows that courses about women are energizing Southern English departments, if not yet conspicuously fulfilling a line of curriculum development envisioned by the Rockefeller Commission in its call for "new materials for the teaching of the humanities."

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