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*“The more different things are, the more I like them, from playing the flute, to working on stage crew (which in our school was an experience!) to French—oh, anything! Now I’m one of forty-eight guinea pigs in Cornell’s six year Ph.D. program. It’s just great being treated like a valuable member of the community after the discipline I am used to. I’ll have my bachelor’s degree in ’69, master’s in ’70, Ph.D. in ’72. After that? The Peace Corps I think, but that’s a long way off.*  
MARGIE WALLER, 18, Indianapolis, Indiana: National Merit Scholar

## Marguerite Waller: A Tribute

### Áine O’Healy

Marguerite Rowland Waller, professor emerita of Gender Studies at UC-Riverside and a scholar of Dante, Petrarch, Italian cinema, and feminist studies, died on March 11 after a brief struggle with cancer. Known to her family, friends, and colleagues as Margie, she was born in Nyack, New York, and grew up in Indianapolis, where her parents taught at Butler University. Valedictorian of her high school class, Margie won a National Merit Scholarship in 1966, and in January 1967 she was featured on the cover of *Seventeen* as one of America’s most “talented teens.” As the accompanying article in the magazine indicates, she was part of the first cohort of high achievers accepted into a program at Cornell that paid all expenses for a six-year accelerated PhD. Graduating with a BA in English at Cornell in 1969, as scheduled, she nonetheless decided to transfer to Yale to pursue her graduate work.

Margie’s life-long habits of resourcefulness and attentiveness to the needs of others came to the fore during a tragic event that occurred at Cornell in April 1967, when she survived a dorm fire in which eight students and one resident faculty member perished. Although arson was suspected, the cause of the fire has never been confirmed. Margie and her roommate Margaret Ferguson were already aware of the vulnerability of the building to the eventuality of a fire, given its obvious lack of fire escapes and sprinklers. With courage and ingenuity, they led several others to safety from their second-floor window on that fateful night with the help of an improvised escape rope they had fashioned from knotted bedsheets. In October, 2019—just a few months before her own death—Margie returned to Cornell along with other survivors to remember those who had been killed in the fire and to unveil a memorial that the University had finally agreed to install in their honor more than fifty years after the tragedy.

On her way to obtaining a PhD in Comparative Literature at Yale, Margie spent a year studying at the University of Florence, an experience that sparked her life-long love of Italy and its culture. It was indeed at Yale that her enduring scholarly engagement with the writings of Dante and Petrarch began. Simultaneously, she became attuned to the influences of contemporary French theory. Her interest in emerging theoretical discourses eventually infused

her dissertation on Petrarch as well as her subsequent monograph, *Petrarch's Poetics and Literary History* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), which drew explicitly on the deconstructive approach of Paul de Man and other contemporary theorists. Margie's ability to bring into conversation with each other literary texts, theoretical paradigms, and interpretive frameworks shaped in strikingly different historical or cultural contexts was to become one of the most consistent features of her interdisciplinary scholarship throughout her career.

In 1974, Margie began her first academic appointment in the English Department at Amherst College, a year before the institution became co-ed. As she ascended the ranks from Assistant to Associate to full Professor, she felt impelled to do battle with some of the conservative values and practices of the college, which still retained the hierarchies of a traditional, all-male, elite institution. A determined innovator and an activist, in 1986 she helped to establish (and later chaired) the Department of Women's Studies at a time when there was scant institutional appreciation for its value and necessity. Her interest in film was also ignited at Amherst, where she befriended a handful of colleagues who turned out to be keen cinephiles, organizing regular home screenings on 16 mm of international art films. It was in this context that Margie first developed a passion for Italian art cinema, which would occupy a substantial portion of her intellectual energy for the rest of her life. She also took summer courses in film production at Columbia, NYU, and later, Harvard, developing a clear understanding of the technical and material elements at the basis of film language, a focus that would remain central to her close readings of all film texts for the remainder of her career. She eventually produced, shot and edited a small number of video documentaries. Among these was the 15-minute video essay, *Snapshots: Citizens Without Shelter* (1996) on the effects and implications of homelessness in Santa Monica, which was aired regularly on City TV in Santa Monica in the late 1990s.

Members of CICIS will, of course, be more familiar with Margie's engagement with Italian studies than many other aspects of her rich, multi-faceted, and very productive career. Her distinctive voice as a scholar of Italian cinema emerged in the late 1980s when she began attending Italian conferences, offering dazzling and utterly innovative readings of films by Federico Fellini, Liliana Cavani, Lina Wertmüller and Maurizio Nichetti to a sometimes bewildered, but more often delighted audience of Italianists. Her presentations were unique. Eschewing both straightforward auteurist readings and the psychoanalytic frameworks embraced at the time by the most prominent feminist film theorists, Margie's approach was grounded in an examination of the processes of signification embedded in film texts and the political stakes that emerged in each case. Over the years, her critical apparatus grew increasingly expansive and intersectional, embracing not only Deleuzian and deconstructive influences, but also feminist, postcolonial and decolonial frameworks.

At the center of Margie's decades-long engagement with Italian cinema was her scholarship on Fellini. In the director's oeuvre she found a fascinating complexity and political depth, as well as stylistic brilliance, which she analyzed attentively in the many articles she devoted to his films. Together with Frank Burke, she edited a milestone collection of essays on Fellini's work, *Federico Fellini: Contemporary Perspectives* (University of Toronto Press, 2002), which brought new critical paradigms to bear on the director's films and gave prominence to several of his later works that had not yet been the subject of scholarly attention. Margie returned to Fellini in the final years of her life, conceptualizing and editing another, considerably larger and more ambitious collection of essays on the filmmaker's work in collaboration again with Frank Burke, and with Marita Gubareva (*A Companion to Federico Fellini*, Wiley 2020).

In 2016, Margie invited me to co-edit an issue of *California Italian Studies* with the title *Moving Images*. Assuming that what she had in mind was an issue on cinema, I immediately agreed. Once we started drafting the announcement, however, I realized that she was suggesting something quite different. In other words, with characteristic deconstructive flair, she wanted to shake up predictable categories, aiming at what she described as “an interdisciplinarity that would resist all programs and prescriptions.” As she explained, we were not looking for contributions about images that move across a screen, but rather about images (whether verbal, visual, or architectural) that move the viewer or reader in challenging ways, dissipating identities and displacing taken-for-granted concepts. Although Margie and I had collaborated previously, co-organizing conference panels, contributing essays to each other’s books, and so on, we had not until that point ever conceptualized a project together. As we crafted the call for contributions, I had the dizzying sense that I was out of my depth, not quite comprehending Margie’s overall vision. Yet, as the submissions came in and we started the work of discussion and evaluation, the issue began to take shape and the “moving images” began to cohere. Working with Margie in this capacity was a revelation. I was struck by the generosity and respect with which she read each submission, even those that from the outset seemed an unlikely fit for the project. As an editor, she was extremely rigorous, and even when our responses to particular submissions did not match, I could not fail to appreciate the seriousness of her engagement with the editorial process.

I had first met Margie at an Italian conference in 1988, shortly before she left Amherst to take up a position at the University of California-Riverside. Our new geographical proximity allowed us to become friends and frequent interlocutors over the span of three decades, despite her extremely busy schedule, exhausting commute, and intense workload. At UCR Margie was affiliated successively—and in some cases, simultaneously—with the Departments of English, Comparative Literature, and Gender and Sexuality Studies, as well as the Program of Visual Studies, until her retirement in 2018. Giving generously of her time, she chaired departments, created new courses and programs, networked with other scholars nationally and internationally, and inspired and supported her students, both graduate and undergraduate, in multiple remarkable ways. In 2007-2008 she also spent a year as the resident director of the University of California’s Rome Study Center.

While at UCR Margie co-organized three international feminist conferences and convened a transnational feminist Resident Research Project at UC’s Humanities Research Institute. The conferences resulted in three co-edited books: *Frontline Feminisms: Women, War and Resistance* (Routledge, 2001); *Dialogue and Difference: Feminisms Challenge Globalization* (Palgrave, 2005); *The Wages of Empire: Neoliberal Policy, Repression, and Women’s Poverty* (Routledge, 2012); as well as a special issue of *Social Identities* (2006). Another of Margie’s most significant publications in recent years was *Postcolonial Cinema Studies* (Routledge, 2012), a groundbreaking collection of essays edited in collaboration with Sandra Ponzanesi that brought film studies into conversation with postcolonial and decolonial critical discourses.

Yet Margie was never simply an academic. She was, above all, a teacher/scholar/activist who invested her life’s energy in identifying injustices and seeking appropriate change. Believing that social activism was the cornerstone of effective teaching and scholarship, she was always acutely aware of the inequities, abuses and institutionalized racism and sexism of late capitalism. Over the years, she undertook multiple initiatives to facilitate communication among women of different backgrounds around the world. In the early 1990s, she helped establish Las Comadres, a women’s art-making collective active in the San Diego/Tijuana borderlands. Later,

she became a supporter of the World Courts of Women, an NGO led by Tunis-based Corinne Kumar that is dedicated to providing public hearings to women traditionally excluded from formal political and legal proceedings. In more recent years her activism was mainly focused on the field of sustainability, probing the connections between and among racism, capitalism, entrenched forms of patriarchy, and environmental degradation. Before retiring from UCR, she successfully designed and implemented a new undergraduate major in Sustainability Studies, the first interdisciplinary program of its kind in the nation.

With enthusiastic anticipation Margie had planned multiple new projects for her retirement. Sadly, it had barely begun when she suddenly became terminally ill. A shining example of intellectual generosity, rigor, and integrity, she has left an important legacy for other scholars, teachers, and future generations of students. She will be greatly missed.