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Reclaiming Our 1970s Feminist History

by Judy Wells



Judy Wells, late 1970s feminist. Photo by Andrew Williams.

We did it, and we were exultant! After five years of work, we five women, all in our 70s, had established the Berkeley Women's Studies Movement Archive at the prestigious Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. We were in the Comp Lit Library, the department in which we had all received our PhDs and MAs in the 1970s, and were now being celebrated as early founders of Women's Studies at Cal, Berkeley, by Sophie Volpp, Chair of Comparative Literature, and Laura Nelson, Chair of Gender and Women's Studies. I could hear the campanile bells ringing in the background as if saluting our victory. It was November 6, 2019, 50 years after our grad student colleague, Marsha Hudson, had put up signs around the Cal campus, asking for women to join her feminist literary salon.

We five, the PerSisters as we called ourselves, who worked to establish the new Women's Studies Movement Archive are Gloria Bowles, founder of the first Women's Studies Program at Cal; Bridget Connelly, Emerita Professor of Rhetoric at Cal; Carol Urzi, lawyer and translator; Kathleen Weaver, poet, editor, and translator; and myself, Judy Wells, feminist poet and essayist. What galvanized us to preserve our feminist history?

The awakening moment came when we learned of our colleague Deirdre Lashgari's death, sadly from Alzheimer's in 2014. As a graduate student, Deirdre played an important role in helping start women's literature courses in the Comparative Literature Department in the early 1970s. Not only was she an inspiring and innovative teacher for her women's studies students, she was also co-editor of two international anthologies of poetry by women: *The Other Voice: Women's Poetry in Translation* (Norton, 1976) and *Women Poets of the World* (Macmillan, 1983).

On November 16, 2014, Bridget Connelly and I organized a memorial for Deirdre at Le Bateau Ivre in Berkeley, a café many of us frequented in our grad student days. Even on this sad occasion, it was still a wonderful, warm reunion of Comparative Literature women from our feminist activist days at Cal, and we agreed to get together again soon. Gloria Bowles offered her beautiful home in the Berkeley hills for a meeting in spring, 2015. On April 18, 2015, after catching up on each other's lives, we began a serious discussion: Deirdre Lashgari's academic papers were in danger of being auctioned off or destroyed. Could we save Deirdre's papers? And what about our own academic papers documenting the beginning of Women's Studies in the Comparative Literature Department and at Cal in the 1970s? We needed an archive for our

feminist history, and we needed to begin this project while we still had the energy as women in our 70s to do it!

My own strong motivation for starting this project also hinged on current research I had done on The Bancroft Library. Celebrating its 50th anniversary, the 1964-65 Free Speech Movement at Cal was getting lots of attention. A gift of several million dollars had been donated to The Bancroft Library to create an FSM digital archive and oral history project and to build the Free Speech Movement Café in Cal's Moffett Undergraduate Library, commemorating Mario Savio and the Free Speech Movement.

The history of the feminist movement at UCB, which quickly followed the Free Speech Movement, had not been getting any attention either from the university or the press. We didn't have the big bucks, but since our group had been involved in women's studies at Cal since its beginnings, we decided to propose to The Bancroft to establish a Women's Studies Movement Archive, paralleling the Free Speech Movement title. We collectively wrote to the director of the Bancroft, Professor Elaine Tennant, explaining our project as a vital part of the history of the University of California, Berkeley. I quote from our letter in part:

What started in the late Sixties as freewheeling meetings concerning women's status in our department, including the paucity of women writers in the curricula, went on to evolve in several directions—lobbying for funds to teach women's courses under the aegis of the Comparative Literature department, researching and translating women writers, and writing feminist literary dissertations.

The translation efforts led to several anthologies of women's poetry including *The Other Voice: Twentieth Century Women Poets in Translation* (W.W. Norton 1976) edited by Joanna Bankier, Carol Cosman, Doris Earnshaw, Joan Keefe, Deirdre Lashgari, and Kathleen Weaver; *Penguin Book of Women Poets* (Penguin 1978) ed. by Cosman, Keefe, and Weaver; and *Women Poets of the World* (Macmillan 1983) ed. by Bankier, Lashgari, and Earnshaw.

Our graduate student-taught courses in women's studies were the precursor to the founding of a Women's Studies Program in 1976. This foundational work is the subject of a memoir by Gloria

Bowles, *Living Ideas: A Memoir of the Tumultuous Founding of Berkeley Women's Studies* (2009). Bowles coordinated the program from 1976 to 1983, lecturer 1983 to 1985.

The political, literary translation, and curriculum development phases of our Comparative Literature feminist activity are documented by essays in *The Berkeley Literary Women's Revolution: Essays from Marsha's Salon* (McFarland 2005), edited by Marsha Hudson, Bridget Connelly, Doris Earnshaw, Olivia Eielson, and Judy Wells.

We are concerned to know if materials generated by these activities might have a rightful place in the Bancroft. These include, besides publications, a short film, course syllabi, translation and other papers, including documents pertaining to the founding of the UCB women's studies department, some of which are held by the founding coordinator of women's studies.

To our delight, Elaine readily accepted our proposal. She had been a young professor in the German Department at Cal in our era and remembered the feminist movement of the 1970s well and with sympathy. We eventually met with Kathryn M. Neal, Associate University Archivist, who told us: “We definitely want to make sure that documentation of this key aspect of campus history is preserved....” Kathi would become our key liaison with The Bancroft Library.

The hard part came next—locating our Comp Lit sisters and persuading them to look through their personal archives, organize their feminist materials, and donate them to the Bancroft. We had some setbacks. Marsha Hudson, an FSM participant and early feminist (our “Mario Savio”) who started a women’s literature salon in her home before she moved it to the UC campus and founded the Comp Lit Women’s Caucus (the engine of many of our feminist endeavors) had relocated many times and her papers were lost along the way. But we had many successes, including the discovery that Deirdre Lashgari’s niece had salvaged some of her aunt’s feminist papers and would organize them for us. We successfully contacted Doris Earnshaw’s daughter who had salted away her mom’s academic papers when Doris went into assisted living. We were also happy to learn Lisa Gerrard, a long-time lecturer at UCLA, meticulously saved and

organized her archives of the Comp Lit Women's Caucus and would donate them to the Women's Studies Movement Archive.

Amongst ourselves, the five PerSisters, Gloria Bowles, as founder of the first Women's Studies Program at Cal and editor with Renate Klein of the highly influential *Theories of Women's Studies* (Routledge, 1983), had preserved her feminist archives safely in her storeroom, a valuable trove. She had already used her own papers to write and publish her memoir of the tumultuous founding of Women's Studies at Cal, *Living Ideas*, in 2009. Gloria's storeroom also became a depot for other Comp Lit women who dug through their files and boxed up their feminist history.

I, Judy Wells, a pack rat of sorts, had also preserved my feminist papers from the 1970s, not just from the Comp Lit Women's Caucus activities and my dissertation, "Madness and Women: A Study of the Themes of Anger and Insanity in Modern Literature by Women," but from the explosion of Women's Liberation events I attended in the Berkeley/Oakland area at the same time. I have to thank my mother for storing these papers in her attic and not tossing them, as I led a peripatetic life as a poet and part-time teacher post my Ph.D. After she died, these papers eventually came to rest in my Berkeley garage. I found four key boxes of my women's studies materials there and spent days organizing these fascinating relics.

This process took a long time. As I sorted through my papers, I relived my past, my 10 years in graduate school, with all its ups and downs—the stress of all the exams, the feeling of never being able to master all the material and languages, plus memories of what wasn't in the

archive—the failed romantic relationships. But I also had memories of the sheer exhilaration of participating in a liberation movement that finally gave me an analysis of my life as a woman.

Of our five PerSisters, Bridget Connelly and I, along with Olivia Eielson, Doris Earnshaw, and Marsha Hudson, had already plunged into our pasts in 2000 by co-editing a book of essays: *The Berkeley Literary Women's Revolution: Essays from Marsha's Salon*, about the collaborative founding of Women's Studies in the Comp Lit Dept. in the 1970s. We ended up with 17 solid essays, including our own. Some women readily wrote theirs; others were reluctant, perhaps not wanting to revisit the past or not recognizing the importance of what we were trying to do—claiming a role in creating a feminist history of ourselves and women's studies at UC Berkeley. Or they remembered our feminist history was sometimes fraught with conflict.

Our group, however, for the Women's Studies Movement Archive, effectively worked together as a team. Bridget Connelly and Carol Urzi played key roles in communicating with people. Bridget liked to pick up the phone and call our former Comp Lit colleagues. Carol, our lawyer, liked to meet people in person and kept in contact with the Gender and Women's Studies Department chairs and Sophie Volpp, Chair of the Comparative Literature Department. As a literary scholar, Sophie was very appreciative of our Comp Lit feminist literary history and feminist pedagogy. Kathleen Weaver, a meticulous editor, was excellent at finding the right words to use in e-mails with the Bancroft. Bridget, as a professor emerita of Rhetoric, and Gloria Bowles, as founder of the Women's Studies Program, knew many key feminists on campus. I was one of the first to have my women's studies and women's liberation boxes ready to send to

The Bancroft and learned their bureaucratic procedures, so I could answer my colleagues' many questions. As of this writing, nine Comp Lit sisters have donated their papers to the archive, with more donations to come once the pandemic quarantine is lifted.

2020 is the 150th year anniversary of women entering Cal. The recent Berkeley alumni magazine, *California*, devoted entirely to prominent women who attended Cal, included a timeline from 1870 to the present. Our Comp Lit women had two entries:

1969 Marsha Hudson, BA 68, MA 71, Ph.D. 78, starts the first feminist literary salon, launching an activist movement that eventually establishes the first women's studies major at Berkeley.

1976

The Berkeley Women's Studies Program is founded, introducing the subject of women as a legitimate field of academic inquiry. The program originated from activities led by a group of female graduate students in comparative literature who translated women writers, wrote dissertations focused on female authors and feminist topics, and advocated for equitable hiring, compensation, and promotion for female faculty. **Gloria Bowles, Ph.D. 76** submits the initial proposal for the program in 1974. More than 40 undergraduate students—all women—enroll in the program. In 1991, the Women's Studies Program becomes a full department. In 2005, the name is officially changed to the Department of Gender and Women's Studies.

We're proud of these entries. And we five PerSisters are proud of ourselves. We created something that did not exist before, a Berkeley Women's Studies Movement Archive, and we did it while we were in our 70s. Maybe one day someone will bequeath several million dollars to the prestigious Bancroft Library to digitize our archives and establish a Women's Liberation Café at Cal. Why not?

"Reclaiming Our 1970s Feminist History" by Judy Wells was first published in: *Not Dead Yet: Feminism, Passion and Women's Liberation*, edited by Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne, Spinifex Press, Mission Beach, Australia, 2021.

Access to Berkeley Women's Studies Movement Archive: <http://oskicat.berkeley.edu/search>

Judy Wells is an American poet with twelve poetry books to her credit. Her latest collection, *Dear Phebe: The Dickinson Sisters Go West* is a memoir/novella in poetry and prose about her New England-to-California Dickinson ancestors, three adventurous sisters who traveled from Massachusetts to California in the 1860s to establish new lives as school teachers (Sugartown 2018). Her research led to her proud discovery that Emily Dickinson is indeed her distant cousin. Judy's eleventh poetry collection *The Glass Ship* (Sugartown) completes her trilogy of Irish-themed works, including *Everything Irish* and *Call Home* (Scarlet Tanager Books). Her poetry has appeared in *Veils, Halos, and Shackles: International Poetry on the Oppression and Empowerment of Women*; *Women Write Resistance*; *San Francisco Peace and Hope*; *California Quarterly*; *Marin Poetry Center Anthology*; *Stanford Alumni Magazine*; *Psychological Perspectives*; and *Levure littéraire*. She lives and writes in Berkeley, California. Her website is www.judywells.com.



Judy Wells at the celebration of the Women's Studies Movement Archive in the Comparative Literature library on 11/6/2019, holding a book she co-edited about the beginnings of Women's Studies in the Comparative Literature Department in the 1970s. Photo by Kathleen Weaver.