

BOOK REVIEWS

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL AND ACADEMIC: MEMOIRS OF WOMEN'S STUDIES PIONEERS

by Helen M. Bannan

Wendy Robbins, Meg Luxton, Margrit Eichler, & Francine Descarries, eds., *MINDS OF OUR OWN: INVENTING FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP AND WOMEN'S STUDIES IN CANADA AND QUEBEC, 1966-76*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008. 414p. pap., \$44.95, ISBN 978-1554580378.

Gerda Lerner, *LIVING WITH HISTORY/MAKING SOCIAL CHANGE*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 248p. \$32.00, ISBN 978-0807832936.

Gloria Bowles, *LIVING IDEAS: A MEMOIR OF THE TUMULTUOUS FOUNDING OF BERKELEY WOMEN'S STUDIES*. Gloria Bowles (www.gloriabowles.net), 2009. 309p. pap., \$20.00, ISBN 978-0615321462.

Bonnie J. Morris, *REVENGE OF THE WOMEN'S STUDIES PROFESSOR*. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2009. 184p. pap., \$19.95, ISBN 978-0253220622.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminists in academia began to apply their newly raised consciousness to their experience of the university, both its curricular content and their interactions within and outside its classrooms. Understanding that the personal was political, they insisted that it was also academic, resulting in independent inventions of women's studies courses on campuses throughout North America. Most of us who participated in this process would probably agree with Gerda Lerner, who stated in *Living With History/Making Social Change*, "It has been my great privilege to be part of the most exciting intellectual movement of the twentieth century" (p. 37). Since this was a revolution led mostly by those on the lower rungs of the academic ladder (graduate students, adjuncts, and untenured assistant professors), many women's studies founders continued to teach throughout the rest of the twentieth century, but have now retired, and the institutional histories living in their memories can no

longer be easily tapped by successors staffing the programs they started. It is important to the continuity of the discipline to record their accounts of the prodigious effort it took to make women a permanent part of the university curriculum.

As aware as suffragists had been of the significance of their work and as eager to preserve its history, many pioneers of women's studies kept journals and saved flyers, correspondence, and syllabi.¹ When Florence Howe called upon several of them to interpret this critical episode in both their lives and women's history, they were ready. The book Howe edited from their responses appeared in 2000 as *The Politics of Women's Studies: Testimony from 30 Founding Mothers*.² Its contributors were more diverse than critics might expect; about a fourth were women of color, including five African Americans and two Latinas. Expressed commitments to inclusive curriculum abound,

including sexual orientation and class as well as racial differences among women. Some feminist innovators had earned significant activist credentials in civil rights, antiwar, new left, or student movements; some were faculty wives, permanently underemployed due to university anti-nepotism rules. More than half of the group was trained in literature (Howe was the first woman president of the Modern Language Association), and most of the others in history or social science. In loosely organized collectives, much at odds with hierarchical university culture, those few pioneers like Howe who already had tenure provided insights into the ways of the university to their less experienced colleagues, and somehow, hurdles were cleared and programs established. As historian Mari Jo Buhle wrote in her fine introduction, many of our founding mothers "became feminists through the process of teaching courses, organizing programs,

and developing the curriculum,” and they recalled teaching their first women’s studies course as “the most exciting and the most exhausting experience of their academic careers.”³

Women’s studies appeared simultaneously in Canada, generated by academics similarly inspired to curricular innovation by an active feminist movement, as detailed in *Minds of Our Own: Inventing Feminist Scholarship and Women’s Studies in Canada and Québec, 1966–1976*, edited by four Canadian founders: Wendy Robbins, Meg Luxton, Margrit Eichler, and Francine Descarries — three social scientists and one English professor. Combining their separate feminist history projects, the editors issued a call for essays by those who had created feminist courses or programs during the decade bounded by the start of the Committee for the Equality of Women in Canada in 1966 and the end of the UN’s International Women’s Year, 1975. An excellent introduction sets the social and cultural context Canadian women faced in the mid-twentieth century, including both patriarchal generalities and Canadian specifics. The editors note that each of the forty contributors, predominantly social scientists and including two women of color and two men, was “inventing a ‘first,’” as, “struggling with few resources in the face of resistant institutions and sometimes fierce opposition,” each created a course or a research project, at a time when doing feminist research constituted “a concrete act of militancy” (pp. 1, 28). Later, they united to establish a field with its full academic infrastructure: programs, scholarly associations, and journals.

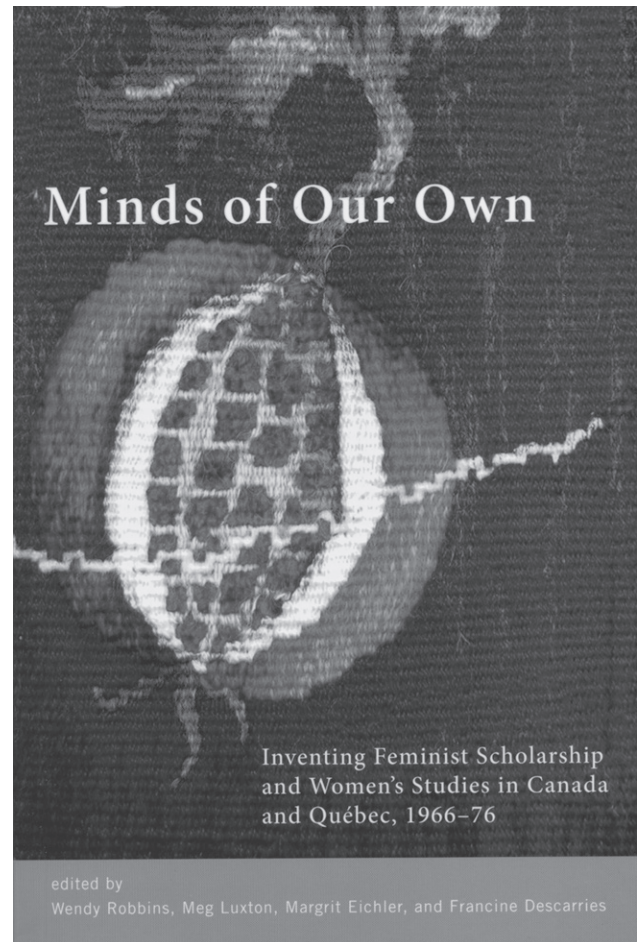
Each reader will treasure different insights from these generally clear and interesting essays. Dorothy E. Smith explained “just how radical the experience of the women’s movement was”

for pioneers who, like her born in the 1920s, “had lived and thought within the masculinist regime,” since “[f]or us, the struggle was as much within ourselves” (p. 69). She used a powerful metaphor of giving birth to explain how she experienced this change of consciousness. I also particularly enjoyed pieces by Pat Armstrong and Linda Briskin, because as students like me in the 1960s and 1970s, they echoed my own memories. Armstrong wrote, “While we faced enormous opposition, we were optimistic about our collective capacity to understand women’s conditions and our ability to make change.” (p. 252). Briskin evaluated this “exhilarating optimism” as “naïve — in fact, shockingly innocent” (p. 297), a self-criticism with which I concur. I was especially glad that Armstrong admitted what I most remember: “We also had fun” (p. 255).

The editors’ conclusion highlights key themes in the essays, emphasizing the blatant sexism in university culture and the emotional intensity generated by working with other women to change the system, often risking their careers. In this foundational period, both the lack of materials and the relatively small “difference in knowledge between professors and students” created an unusual moment in educational history, when students

were more apt to be “co-creators of knowledge” than its passive recipients (p. 335). Subsequent generations in women’s studies have sought to prolong this experience as a key ideal of feminist pedagogy. Although several essays allude to broken relationships as part of the high personal costs of being a women’s studies pioneer, the overwhelming consensus valued this “life changing” experience (p. 335).

This anthology provides a solid foundation for appreciating recent book-length works by two women’s studies pioneers, Gerda Lerner and Gloria Bowles, and one from the following generation, Bonnie Morris, the first women’s studies minor to graduate from her alma mater, who later earned a Ph.D. in women’s history, the degree specialization that Lerner initiated.



Tension between women's studies the "interdiscipline" and feminist work within the disciplines has characterized the field from its inception, when some feminist scholars and university administrators feared women's "ghettoization" in an academic equivalent of the old-fashioned newspapers' "women's page." However, many early practitioners participated in both women's studies and their primary fields, as later institutionalized in joint faculty appointments.

Gerda Lerner is usually identified with her discipline of history, but she also founded a women's studies program, a process she explains in *Living With History, Making Social Change*, her collection of essays emphasizing her career as a feminist academic. Lerner condenses the stories of both her early resistance to and flight from Nazism

and her years as an immigrant and left-wing activist in the U.S., focusing on how her unusual life and her independent reading of Mary Beard's *Woman as Force in History* (1946)⁴ inspired her to resume her education at midlife, insisting that she would study women's history (pp. 30–31).

Completing her degrees in record time at Columbia, Lerner continued to fight to make her subject a legitimate field. Despite her outstanding scholarly productivity and teaching innovations, Lerner was denied early tenure at Sarah Lawrence College, which she ascribed to her efforts, beginning in 1969, to establish women's studies there. By 1972, when she finally was tenured, she was team-teaching a women's studies course and co-directing the women's studies program with Joan Kelly (pp.

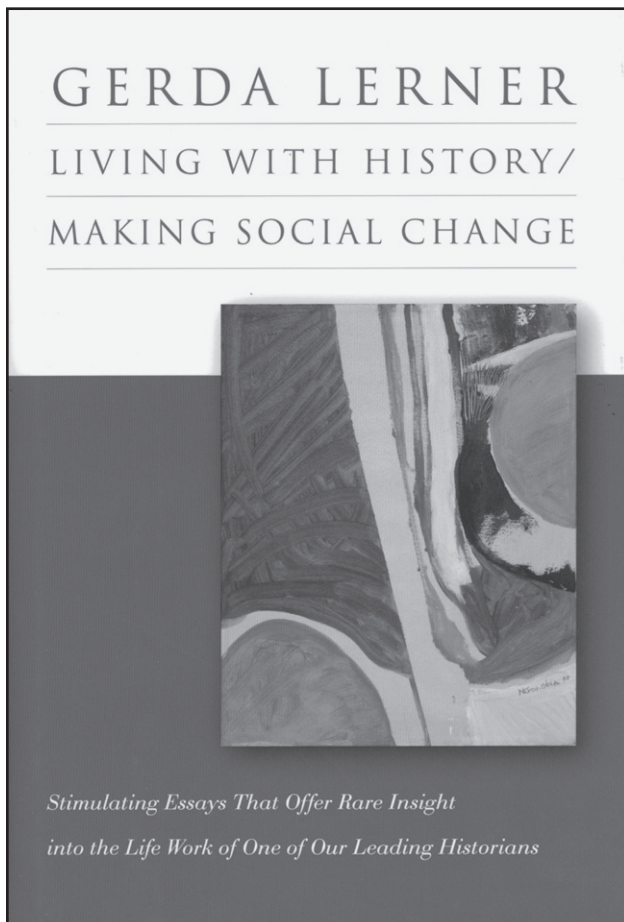
55–56). Echoing many Canadian founders, Lerner described her program as "underfunded and understaffed"; she and the faculty she recruited to teach in it faced "harassment, disapproval, lost merit increases, and constant overwork" (p. 63). But she, and they, prevailed.

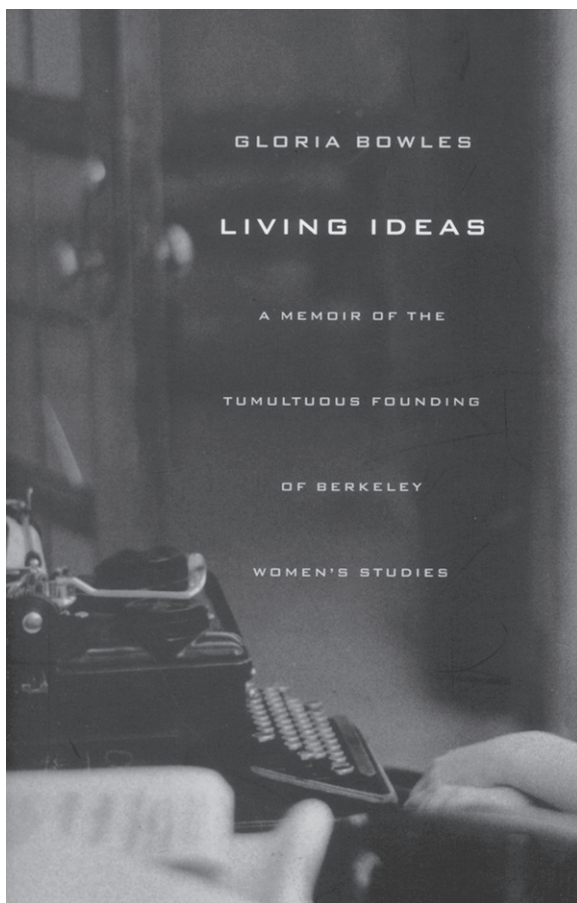
Lerner's disciplinary credentials were singularly stellar, as she had co-founded the Coordinating Committee of Women in the Historical Profession, built the M.A. in women's history at Sarah Lawrence and the Ph.D. program in women's history at the University

of Wisconsin–Madison, and served as president of the Organization of American Historians. But her interdisciplinary commitment was consistent, evidenced especially in the chapters titled "Transformational Feminism" and "Holistic History." She also demonstrates interactive feminist pedagogy and activism linked with scholarship in the chapter called "Workshop on the Construction of Deviant Out-Groups," complete with syllabi. To Lerner, the discipline/interdiscipline issue was not an either/or choice, but an example of, both/and complementarity, natural for someone who was a writer before she was a historian (p. 157) and who shows in these essays that she still excels at both.

Gloria Bowles, best known for an excellent early anthology, *Theories of Women's Studies* (1983),⁵ expanded the autobiographical essay included in Howe's collection into a self-published memoir, *Living Ideas: A Memoir of the Tumultuous Founding of Berkeley Women's Studies*, which she says had "befuddled university and trade presses alike for its evocation of both the academic and the personal" (acknowledgments, unpagged). Bowles introduces herself as a student of the 1960s, struggling in the context of a sexual revolution to answer the question "Could I be at once an intellectual and a woman?" (pp. 9–10). She describes her relationships in greater detail than I think necessary; I would prefer a more analytical approach to her complicated love life, as well to the economic and appearance privileges she admits far less effusively.

Bowles is much sharper in delineating the personal, political, and academic issues that surfaced in the founding of the University of California, Berkeley, women's studies program. In 1972, when she took her Ph.D. comps in comparative literature there, she read an enormous list of





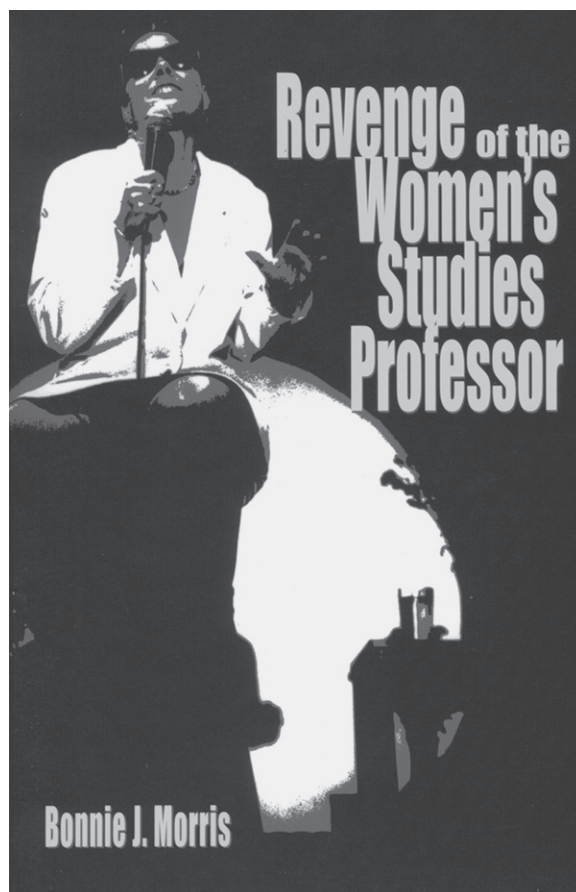
books, in four languages, that included no women authors. As she and her peers discovered women writers, they became political, successfully demanding that the department offer “women’s courses”; Bowles taught one of the first in 1973. When she and her students met in her apartment, “we felt special together, because we were doing something new” (p. 16). They truly were: “The fact is, students founded women’s studies at Berkeley,” she declares (p. 18); it was the initially all-student Women’s Studies Committee that decided in 1974 to push for a “group major” in women’s studies—“a grouping together of existing courses to create a major . . . [that] cost the university no money’ (p.40). The college curriculum committee rejected the students’ first proposal, but after Bowles recruited faculty and administrative support, the proposal passed in 1975. When Bowles

finished her dissertation in 1976, she was offered a half-time position as Berkeley’s first women’s studies coordinator.

Bowles’s subtitle accurately characterizes as “tumultuous” the political struggles endured by the new program and its coordinator in its first decade: teachers’ authority vs. democratic ideals; gay/straight tensions; and, most of all, faculty struggles over program governance complicated by personal jealousies, the university’s inherently hierarchical tendencies, and the particular pressures of a prominent research-focused institution with an entrenched departmental

structure. By 1985, faculty, including her dissertation chair, pushed Bowles out of the program she helped found. An inheritance has enabled her to live as an independent scholar, but her bitterness over her Berkeley years remains sharp. Robin Lakoff, an active faculty member in the Berkeley program since its beginning, writes, “Gloria’s vision was to make something completely different from the university in its very midst...It still seems shockingly, daringly revolutionary... And...it could not survive” (p. 300).

But women’s studies evolved and survived, there and elsewhere; its students learned and grew and continued to push beyond equality, for social change. As Gerda Lerner said, “Leadership is creating something that lives on without you,... that replaces and surpasses you, that has a life of its own” (p. 186). Perhaps Bonnie J. Morris, belonging to the first generation to enroll in the courses the founders had created and earn the degrees they had fought to establish, embodies the titular “revenge of the women’s studies professor[s]” who came before her! Morris regarded the “tall Berlin Wall between *women’s history* and *women’s studies*” [her italics] erected in her graduate school as “a waste as well as a deception” (p. 41); she chose to leap over it in her self-identification as well as in her teaching career. Because of a con-



tinually bad academic job market, she has repeated the founders' experience of being underpaid and overworked as an "academic nomad," applying to almost three hundred positions in five years (p. 92). Morris explains the structural problems that make tenure-track appointments in women's studies particularly scarce, but she is also frank about the challenges her life as an adjunct entails. She taught both at Harvard and at "Where Hell Freezes Over," an unnamed school that provided "rich material" to illustrate Bernice Sandler's "Chilly Classroom Climate" (p. 101), before finding more consistent employment at George Washington University.

Morris's performance skills enabled her to exact her own "revenge" in the one-woman show she has toured with nationally and internationally since 1993, using humor to explode audience stereotypes about women's studies. In the book Morris expands her script; each chapter or "scene" begins with an anecdote, illustrated with a photo of her performing or posing with dignitaries. Sections on teaching women's studies during a Semester at Sea and pushing President Clinton to appreciate women's basketball were especially interesting to me. Although Morris comes out as a lesbian on stage and in print (pp. 78–79), she does not provide any details about her relationships; she uses "the personal is political" as an analytical tool in presenting discussions with students about appearance anxiety and date rape, but doesn't apply it publicly to her own life.

Morris's book demonstrates that while today's students no longer demand women's studies courses as they did in the early years, they still need them. "Much to our chagrin, women's studies has succeeded in becoming just like any other class — except that...the focus, alas, has shifted from activism to self-interest" (p. 43). Morris quotes lib-

erally from her students, revealing that many still grow up accepting appalling stereotypes and profoundly disturbing levels of privilege and sexism. And, sadly, they seem more afraid of feminism than we were in the 1960s.

If I were still teaching, I would assign *Revenge of the Women's Studies Professor* to a senior seminar. I might recommend *Living Ideas* for a women's studies reading group, particularly if the participants were involved in an especially contentious university or program context. Selected essays from *Living with History* and *Minds of Our Own* would be useful both in the classroom and for faculty development work. In an essay in *Living with History*, "Autobiography, Biography, Memoir and the Truth," Lerner concludes that biographers — historians — can approximate "truth" better than personal narratives of self-disclosure, since historical research can fill in the blanks individuals create through repression and forgetfulness (p. 149). I think anyone intent on discovering the true origins of women's studies would do well to start by reading the works reviewed here. The many individual truths they contain collectively provide an excellent, multi-faceted view of an exciting era, when women worked together to understand how the personal was political and to make it academic, too.

Notes

1. I am aware of only one anthology of memoirs by Second Wave feminist academics published before Howe's interdisciplinary volume, and it focused, not surprisingly, on historians: Eileen Boris & Nupur Chaudhuri, eds, *Voices of Women Historians: The Personal, the Political, the Professional* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). Gerda Lerner's essay, the first chapter in that book, is reproduced in Lerner's *Living*

with History/Making Social Change, one of the titles reviewed in this essay.

2. Florence Howe, ed., *The Politics of Women's Studies: Testimony from Thirty Founding Mothers* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2000).

3. Mary Jo Buhle, "Preface: Everyone a Heroine," in Howe, pp. xx, xxiii.

4. Mary Beard, *Woman as Force in History* (New York: Macmillan, 1946).

5. Gloria Bowles & Renate Duelli Klein, eds., *Theories of Women's Studies* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983). I often assigned "Is Women's Studies an Academic Discipline?" (pp. 32–45), one of Bowles's essays in that book, in my senior seminar classes.

[Helen M. Bannan began teaching women's studies courses in 1976 at the University of New Mexico; later, she was the first director of women's studies at Florida Atlantic University and the second at West Virginia University. She retired in 2007 from her positions as director and associate professor of women's studies and history at the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh. Currently she is writing a biography of Jessie Jack Hooper, suffragist, clubwoman, and world peace advocate from Oshkosh, whom she has been bringing to life in impersonations since 2008.]

Wisconsin readers are reminded that the history of women's studies in Wisconsin, including several personal reflections, can be found in the volumes digitized as "The History of Women in the University of Wisconsin" collection at <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/UW.UWWomen>