

Nevertheless, They Persisted: Fifty Years of Women Studies as an Academic Discipline

BY GAYATRI DEVI

Julie Shayne, ed., *Persistence is Resistance: Celebrating 50 Years of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies*. University of Washington Libraries Pressbooks Publishing Platform, 2020: uw.pressbooks.pub/happy50thws.

The title of this review of a celebratory volume on the origins, history, and evolution of women studies as an academic discipline is an intentional riff on a now-famous utterance that has become a byword for feminist activism and resistance in the United States.¹ The feminist political and polemical appropriation of this sexist and misogynist remark points to the multilayered, gender- and race-based oppression faced by women both historically

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and in the current cultural moment. When Mitch McConnell and other Senate Republicans silenced Elizabeth Warren, they were simultaneously silencing Coretta Scott King and generations of Black activists, male and female, who fought for voice and visibility in the political process and in the larger context of social justice and civil rights. Similarly, when Senator Warren “persisted,” she upheld the principle of feminist solidarity with those who were historically and politically marginalized.

It is thus fitting that this anthology of writings, which tells the story of women studies as an academic disci-

pline in universities both in the U.S. and in other parts of the world, uses persistence as its organizing trope. The story of this discipline is entirely one of persistence. From total lack of budget to shoestring budgets, from lack of faculty to borrowed faculty spread thin, from no administrative support to active administrative hostility, and from lack of space to shared space with other crowded university “social justice” initiatives, the faculty, staff, and students of this field are intimately familiar with want, need, and having to make do with next to nothing. But the history of women studies is also the history of remarkable resistance and refusal to fade away into nothingness. This excellent anthology is a warm testimonial to the spirit of women studies, which simply refused to die under institutional neglect. All of us who have engaged with this discipline in a university setting would find in this volume a clear mirror of our own experiences.

Current women, gender, and sexuality studies (WGSS) faculty, staff, and students, as well as university administrators, will learn much from this volume about the relentless work done by the early activists, scholars, artists, community members, and students who banded together to create women studies as a minor and a major, often in that order. The volume is divided into three sections:

“The History of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies,” “The Praxis of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies,” and “Doing Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies.” Each section features essays and

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commentaries by WGSS faculty, staff, administrators, students, artists, and others directly and indirectly connected to the discipline.

It is especially heartening to see the active intersectional ethos at the center of this book. African women studies; Latina and Chicana women and gender studies; Indigenous women, gender, and sexuality studies; queer and LGBTQ studies; and women and gender studies in the Global South are all featured in a variety of voices, contexts, and concerns. Directly or indirectly, these evolving intersectional disciplines are the enduring legacy of WGSS.

As Temperance Russell, Lori Lof-tin, and Julie Shayne state in “The

History of San Diego State University's Women's Studies Program," the nation's first women studies academic program was created "as a commitment to provide concrete opportunities to empower students as leaders" (p. 28). This commitment to students enlivens this volume in both its content and format. Student testimonials and artwork are woven among essays and commentaries by faculty, activists, independent scholars, and administrators. In the artist statement accompanying their photograph *Stifle* (featuring a closeup of a woman's face with a hand twisting away at a corner of her mouth), Lauren Raimunde (Smith College,

Women and Gender major, 2020) challenges us to question the true meaning of feminism for ourselves:

Stifle examines the complex journey in practicing feminism beyond proclamation. I want the viewer to question "choice" feminism and its relation to both internalized misogyny and hierarchies in general. Any relationship, whether self, personal, or social, has the ability to repress feelings. A hand intrudes the mouthpiece...But whose hand is it? And what does your reading reveal about your own relationships? (p. 154)

In addition to the loving, intersectionally focused, nonhierarchical presentation of the material, the text itself is digital and open-access, which makes it usable in many different contexts, and there are direct hyperlinks from the table of contents to the individual essays. This is a splendid collection. A special word of praise goes to artist Nicole Carter's wonderful color portraits of the many contributors to the volume. Anyone involved in WGSS, in any capacity, who needs reassurance that they are on the right track will find this volume an invaluable resource and affirmation.

NOTE

1. "Nevertheless, She Persisted": Barnard Students Read Coretta Scott King's Letter," Barnard Center for Research on Women; bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/nevertheless-she-persisted-barnard-students-read-coretta-scott-kings-letter/. In 2017, during the confirmation hearings for Senator Jeff Sessions as the Attorney General of the United States, the Senate voted to stop Senator Elizabeth Warren from speaking against the confirmation. Senator Warren based her objection on a letter written in 1986 by Coretta Scott King, civil rights activist and the widow of Martin Luther King, Jr., in which King had stated, "Mr. Sessions has used the awesome power of his office to chill the free exercise of the vote by black citizens in the district he now seeks to serve as a federal judge." After the Senate voted along party lines to silence Warren, majority leader Mitch McConnell tried to justify the silencing: "Senator Warren was giving a lengthy speech. She had appeared to violate the rule. She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted."

[Gayatri Devi earned her doctorate in English from the University of North Dakota (1995) with a dissertation on the literature of humor and nonviolent resistance. She is currently a professor of English at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia. Her essays and articles on women and gender issues in South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Indigenous films and literature have been published in national and international journals. She can be reached at gdevi@comcast.net.]