

# THE WOMEN'S STUDIES CHAIRS:



Greta Hofmann Nemiroff (centre) with Anne Denis, Susan Clark, Vanaja Dhruvrajan and Meredith Kimball.

## QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

**Greta Hofmann Nemiroff**

*Le gouvernement canadien, par l'entremise du secrétariat d'Etat, a créé cinq chaires en Etudes de la femme dans les universités canadiennes. Ceci pourrait être un bienfait, mais il pourrait aussi s'avérer être l'ultime cooptation des Etudes de la femme. Tout en prenant cette occasion pour améliorer la situation des femmes dans le monde académique, nous devons demeurer alertes aux périls que nous encourons en établissant ces chaires.*

So, we've finally arrived! We too will have Chairs!" Through the Secretary of State, the federal government has endowed five Chairs in Women's Studies in Canadian universities. Wait a moment, though. We must ask ourselves if this is where we want to be and exactly what *kind* of Chairs we would like. On the one hand, we must celebrate the fact that after fifteen years of Women's Studies in Canadian universities, we have become sufficiently respected to be awarded Chairs in our field. On the other hand, Chairs have traditionally been pompous thrones of entrenched conservative power in the university. We must make sure that these

Chairs do not end up sitting on us. For example, traditionally a Professor (usually a man) becomes a Chair . . . a chair of History perhaps. I hope that we will simply occupy Chairs and share them with one another with minimum pomp and maximum effect in transforming that most patriarchal of environments, the university.

Women's Studies itself has become an issue of disagreement in Academia. Some scholars consider it to be a discipline in itself; others see it as an inter-disciplinary construct or as a sub-section of each discipline; then there is a group which views it as an interim form of knowledge which will eventually wither on the vine as the existing disciplines reform themselves into non-sexist fields of research and teaching. It is especially timely to have these Chairs endowed when many Women's Studies programs are slowly becoming eroded either through the disappearance of courses or the fact that they are increasingly being taught by part-timers who have no political base in the university.

The issue of prestige is an important one for the future of Women's Studies.

Women's issues in Canada are becoming increasingly marginalised by the state. While we represent 51% of the population, our issues become relegated to that grab-bag of "weaklings" so perceived by those in power: the "visible minorities" of native peoples, women, and the handicapped. This, of course, does a disservice to each of those groups since our needs are highly variable, although women are a common factor to these categories. The political economy of the university militates against Women's Studies. Most usually the tenured or full time professors who teach Women's Studies bear a kind of double load which parallels that of women engaged in both the paid and unpaid labour forces. They must maintain visibility and a power base in their departments if they want to advance in their careers as well as to entrench Women's Studies in the university. If they work too hard on behalf of Women's Studies, they are in danger of losing credibility in their departments.

Since Women's Studies is usually a program in universities where the power is based in departments, the field and those women who co-ordinate the

programs are often marginalised into positions far from the decision-making regarding the allocation of human and material resources in the university. It is, for example, difficult to exert influence over the departments which cross-list Women's Studies courses. The latter is a frequent phenomenon which can convince prospective students that the university in question offers a large spectrum of Women's Studies courses. In reality, so little control is exerted over their content that frequently they have little or no content related specifically to women; some have an underlying ideology which actively disconfirms feminism. A single woman in a department usually cannot exert influence over the content of these courses, nor can a "co-ordinator" from another discipline.

The power of Women's Studies programs is also frequently eroded by the ambivalence full time faculty might feel towards teaching within them. This means that often the courses are taught by part-timers (many of whom are excellent and should be full time faculty) who are struggling to find a niche in the university. Because the latter are frequently completely focused on Women's Studies within the university, they have a special contribution to make. The inequities of the structure, however, force the full time faculty into this two-tiered position of privilege, often living off the energy of women who do not have the double university load, but also have neither security of employment nor fair pay, nor any kind of power in the university community.

Let us hope that the presence of the Chairs will infect the universities with some respect for Women's Studies. Perhaps such external validation will even influence the disciplines to examine their curricula for sexism and the systemic exclusion of women. It might even seem advantageous to implement some mild form of affirmative action in order to attract Chairs for women.

The Chairs, then, can be either a blessing or the final act of co-optation of Women's Studies. They can become launching pads for a handful of Queen Bees to junket around the world in the name of all of us: the indifferent, the marginal, and those graduate students with fascinating dissertations and no hope of university employment. The Chairs can become bottle necks through which radical thought becomes so reduced and strained that it is unrecognizable. They can conversely become conduits through which

the state sets the feminist agenda for the country, since research is so inherent a factor in government policy-making. While this is all the worst kind of prognostication, it is essential to be cognisant of the dangers in creating Chairs; we have, after all, only the examples of the conservative self-interest which has guided Academia into this particular form of recognition.

Of course, the Chairs also offer women scholars across the country the opportunity to progress in research, explore non-authoritarian pedagogy, and introduce into the academy a model of collaboration. Because of the possible use of the Chairs to connect the university communities with those outside, they offer us the opportunity to develop a praxis for feminist scholarship.

These Chairs are a gift of the State to

Canadian women. Let us hope that one day women of means – and even men – will endow Chairs and programs of Women's Studies. They can legitimize Women's Studies not only in the university but in the schools and colleges as well. If we *occupy* rather than *become* these Chairs (one imagines them as large, carved and clawed), and if we share them well, we have a superb opportunity to change the situation of women within and outside of the university. However, we must be sure to negotiate these perilous waters with relative purity of purpose and in full wakefulness to the dangers.

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