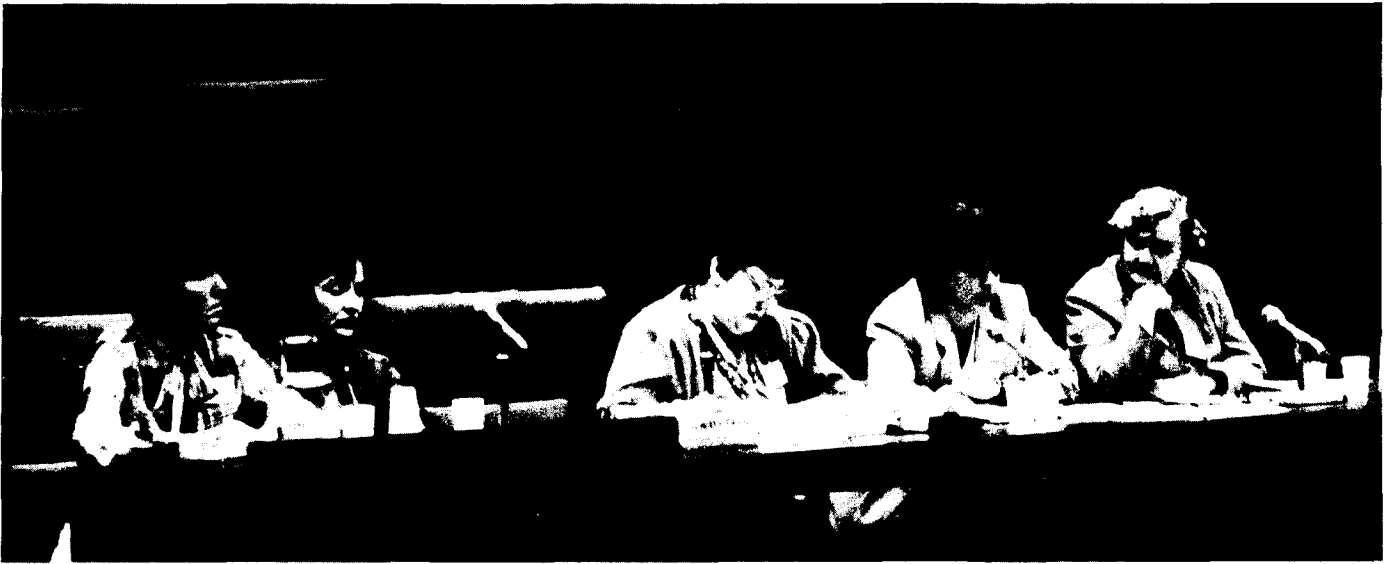


THE FEMINIST CURRICULUM AND



Barbara Latham (second from left) with Betty Lamont, Johanna Stuckey, Lucie Lequin and Jo Vellacott.

THE 'NEW' VOCABULARY

Barbara Latham

Le point central de ma présentation sera la nécessité pour les cours d'introduction à l'étude de la femme d'être aussi actuels que possible; ceci parce que, surtout auprès de petites institutions, ils fournissent de nombreuses questions à débattre pour les autres sciences sociales. Dans ce type de cours l'instructeur se trouve face à des responsabilités de poids, étant donné qu'elle doit non seulement fournir un cadre théorique à partir duquel l'étudiant devra se développer, mais aussi un contenu relié aux problèmes pratiques. Il est doublement difficile de faire les deux choses lorsqu'on veut partir de la situation des femmes dans le monde du travail rémunéré, mais de formuler un cours exclusivement sur des thèmes ou des problèmes provoque finalement trop d'empiètement entre des cours sur la famille, la criminologie et l'anthropologie culturelle – surtout quand l'institutrice est parvenue à éduquer ses paires.

The Canadian political context of the women's studies curriculum has changed. The liberal and socialist environments which at least supported in principle the ideas of academic freedom, a heterogeneous society, equality and liberal education are now a thing of the past – at least temporarily. Teaching women's studies in the context of neoconservatism means that what once appeared to be the "natural" step of transforming

"host disciplines" by introducing issues of gender is problematic. Where units on women have been added to host curriculum, essentially because material pertained to a specific issue, or where units on women have been added somewhat haphazardly or at the expense of autonomous women's studies courses, the problem is particularly conspicuous.

As a result of the women's movement and of growing scholarship on issues pertaining to women, the curriculum of women's studies has always been markedly issues-oriented. This orientation has facilitated units on women appearing in host disciplines from Sociology to Business. For instance, it's not uncommon to have Criminology students writing essays on domestic violence or to have Business students studying female managers. While feminists often teach these units, the instructor is equally likely to be unfamiliar with the feminist analysis which gave birth to these content areas. The woman content may exist in no context at all in these situations or, what becomes more likely, in a context hostile to feminism and to social change generally. It's quite possible that a student may do some introductory research on a topic called domestic violence, rather than wife-battering. After that student talks to a Business student, who has learned that currently women are the highest percentage of initiators of small businesses, she

may well conclude the battered woman of her first essay was herself to blame for not being liberated on schedule.

With individualism, privatization and the human capital theory in economics in ascendancy and being applied to issues of social relationships, the context in which the student has studied women would hardly be feminist. Without an "overarching feminist perspective" (Miles, *Feminism in Canada*: 217), the student is left alone to figure out woman's relationship to society. As a political right-wing environment gives permission for the increased expression of conservative values, the woman content – which we have fought to make a curriculum issue – rapidly gets re-interpreted in a variety of ways. In a Political Science course, feminist views on pornography may be perceived merely as an illustration of a demand for censorship or Women Against Pornography (WAP) only as an example of a grass-roots lobby group; in English, inclusive language may be used to camouflage women's specific experience in culture; in Business, women's business acumen may be defined in terms of traditional motherhood and wifery.

While we once could enjoy introducing woman content into host disciplines – because we anticipated that a foot in the door would ultimately bring in an entire feminist body of thought – this small foot in the door is now very fragile. Since the

conservative mind which relishes the idea of an élite is in the ascendancy, a curriculum which once was accepted as moving towards balance or equality because women, too, were viewed as "subject," is now dismissed or labelled "biased." When truth is arrived at by fiat, then explanation and discovery are readily suspect, especially because no quest is necessary for The Right to proclaim the traditional female role.

Vocabulary itself becomes a battleground. In the debate over reproductive rights, we have already seen the way in which vocabulary obscures the real issues. I hardly need repeat the unfortunate example which presents itself in the titles of the Pro-Life Movement and the Pro-Choice Movement. Another example is found in the terms "private sphere" and "public sphere." With the Right using such terms as "privatization," our terms require more precise definition than ever. Another example is the term "woman-content" which has decidedly different connotations for feminists and for the Right. Feminists mean a "woman-centred" or "pro-woman" content, whereas the Right usually means content which reinforces the traditional role of mother and wife. Yet another example is the term "mainstreaming." When feminists refer to "mainstreaming" in the curriculum, we mean a transformation of the traditional curriculum, whereas "mainstreaming" to the Right means *no* gender analysis. When the economist's vocabulary replaces the vocabulary of social

change and social justice, and when a sports vocabulary dubs powerful financial institutions as mere "players," then the goals are not justice and liberation but profit and winning: the girls may play if they are profit makers and as long as they don't change the rules of the game. In this new environment, then, the effect of adding woman content to the curriculum may be other than we anticipate; it must therefore be done with the utmost care, especially when the host curriculum is not about to be transformed or when the context of the woman content is not easily controlled.

Now, more than ever, women's studies courses are needed in small institutions. With some content on women's issues scattered unsystematically throughout the liberal arts curriculum, the role of the women's studies core course is to give the student a feminist framework to make sense of her fragmented information. However, because woman content may be quite visible in selected areas, the tendency of fearful or traditional curriculum committees (who grow more obvious as education mirrors the political climate) is to say "enough is enough:" core women's studies courses disappear or are vetoed.

This is a particular worry in small institutions and in community colleges where, across the country, autonomous women's studies courses have been gradually dropped from the list of options in calendars. The problem does not seem to be one for the universities, especially with the coming of the five Chairs of Women's

Studies. As community colleges become more and more narrowly defined as training institutes, their environment becomes increasingly defined by economic vocabulary: women's studies courses disappear because they do not fit tidily into this goal of occupational training. The consequence is that thousands of students who travel through community colleges each year will emerge without a coherent interpretation of the changing role of women in Canadian society. This seems particularly unfortunate at a time when feminist scholarship at the university level is reaching new proportions of excellence and importance. Unfortunately, community college graduates will discover the importance of women's issues only when issues directly affect them or when the work of their unions or of feminist university scholars or of feminist activists ultimately reaches them.

No wonder the millenium is slow to arrive; these days I have more and more sympathy for feminists of the thirties and forties.

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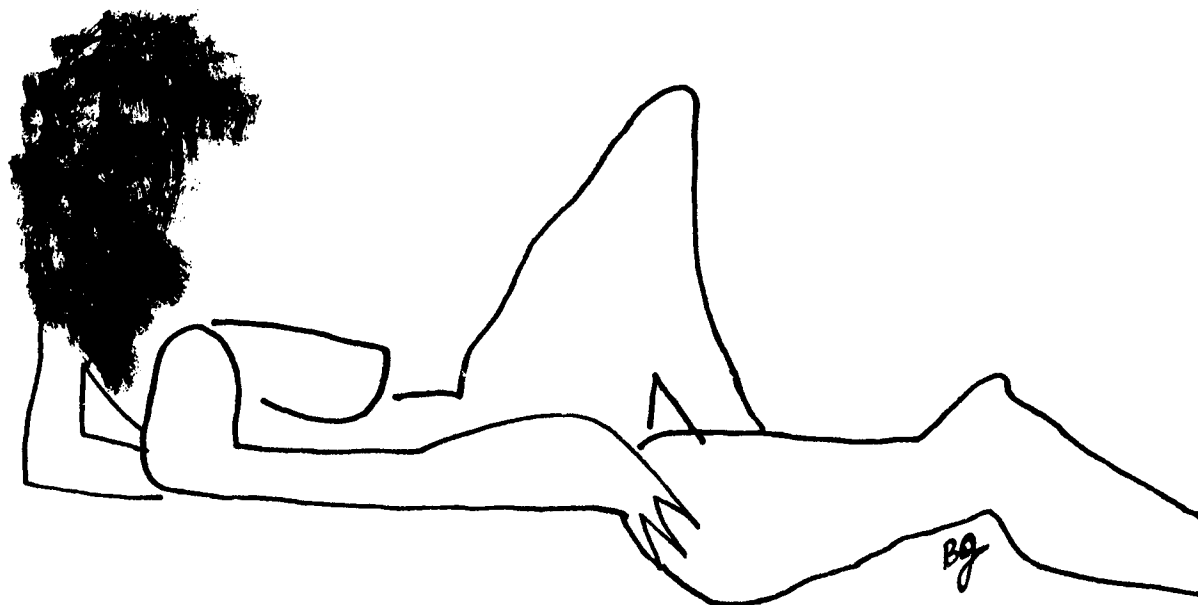


Illustration: Beth Jonkala