



Hartman, J. (1999). A tribute to Ellen Messer-Davidow. *Workplace*, 3, 10-12.

A Tribute to Ellen Messer-Davidow

Joan Hartman

Ellen Messer-Davidow initiated the founding of the Graduate Student Caucus of the Modern Language Association in 1975-76, her second year of service on its then-Commission on the Status of Women, now a permanent MLA committee. The year before she joined the Commission, in 1973-74, we decided, for the first time, to advertise for women interested in serving on it rather than recommending women we knew to the Executive Council of the MLA and leaving them to name new members. We thought we were in danger of creating a female version of the old boys' network that governed MLA by recruiting to the Commission women we knew, energetic friends from the graduate schools we had attended. And we wanted to be sure that new members understood how much work its many activities entailed: our formula, I recollect, was one day a week.

Among the constituencies not represented on the Commission were graduate students, and in 1974 we acquired two, Ellen Messer-Davidow and Barbara Smith. The Executive Council balked at appointing one graduate student, let alone two, but we campaigned and made our case successfully. What attracted us to Ellen, then a graduate student at the University of Cincinnati, was her involvement in community as well as academic activism. (She was familiar with the methods of the Industrial Areas Foundation founded by Saul Alinsky, whose programs for community activists some of us knew.) The Commission was working to make the MLA responsive to the needs and interests of its women members, who in the 1970s were to be found at the lower ranks of less prestigious institutions and in graduate schools. The domestic ideology of the 1950s having given way to the social change of the 1960s, women were undertaking post-baccalaureate study in larger numbers than ever before. The Commission needed members with a commitment to change and the know-how to manage it, at least within the MLA. That we also wanted to change a world that denied equity to us goes without saying--but its structures were less amenable to analysis and organized political activity than the MLA's.

Readers of Ellen's forthcoming book, *Disciplining Feminism: Episodes in the Discursive Production of Social Change* (to be published by Duke University Press) will find, in the preface, an account of the trajectory that led her to graduate school and to activism, and I'll not anticipate her story. Outrage at injustice to herself, quickly generalized, impelled her to acquire the knowledge she needed to fight; wanting a fair shake for herself, she joined with others to work for equity for everybody. A stubbornness she was probably born with kept her at it--and still keeps her at it. She brought to the Commission her intelligence, fierce integrity and energy. As we divvied up the tasks we thought we should be doing in 1974-75, organizing graduate students for the first time fell to her.

She used letters, phone calls, and purple dittos, as we all did then--our organizing, without even xeroxing, not to mention e-mail and the internet, was primitive. Graduate students convened in sufficient numbers at the 1975 MLA convention for them to found a caucus and organize a session for the 1976 convention; the paper Ellen gave then, I note, was called, unsurprisingly, "A New Role for Graduate Students: Change Advocacy." She also served on an ADE/ADFL Job Committee convened to discuss the apparent contraction of positions in English and modern languages after the expansionist decade of the 1960s, the first of many such committees, and gave a paper, "Non-Academic Work: The Unwise No," at a workshop it sponsored. It reflects the detour she made, while still a graduate student, into academic administration--

she had taken her own advice and said yes.

The Commission's primary charge was to document and change the status of women in the profession. We couched our studies in the neutral language of statistical reporting--the MLA, after all, funded us and published them. Wary of passionate readings of statistics and loud cries of "unfair", "unjust," it paid a professional statistician to work with us (Laura Morelock, a student of the radical sociologist Peter Rossi at Johns Hopkins). Our statistics served us well: they told a powerful tale of tracking by type of institution that reserved the profession's cushiest positions, unabashedly, for men only. Professional colleagues, men as well as women, supported our work: reluctant, often, to take political stands and alter time-honored institutional structures, they were nevertheless well disposed toward the women they knew as students and colleagues and responsive to documented injustice. That women now get their fair share of good jobs and bad is cause for celebration, even as we acknowledge the much diminished state of our profession.

Other tasks the Commission took on in the 1970s the now-Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession shares with the Division on Women's Studies in Language and Literature, the Women's Caucus for the Modern Languages, and the women in large numbers who serve on the MLA's many other committees. Then we planned forums and workshops for the national convention: sometimes, it seemed, we ran a counter-convention alongside a convention untouched by women's studies. We nursed the nascent field of women's studies by serving as a clearinghouse and editing volumes of *Feminist Studies*. We edited several volumes of essays of our own on professional issues and maintained sisterly relations with women's caucuses and commissions in other disciplines--for the MLA Commission, emerging from the business meeting of 1968 in which members expressed their opposition to the war in Vietnam that was disrupting colleges and universities and the MLA's refusal to move the 1969 convention from Chicago to protest the police brutality at the Democratic National Convention the previous summer, was a pioneer. We did as many of these tasks as we could, depending upon the interests and energies of our members.

In 1975-76, while still members of the Commission, Ellen and I took on the task of organizing a conference on publishing and women's studies. When I look at the prevalence of gender in the titles of university and trade publishers' offerings today, I smile to remember how, then, they had to be reassured that there were indeed scholarly and popular materials that needed to get into print, women ready to write and edit them, and women teachers, students, and nonacademic readers interested in buying them. Two volumes of essays from that conference, *Women in Print I and II*, were published by the MLA in 1982, edited while Ellen was still finishing her doctorate. We began talking about a third volume, an attempt to assess the effects of feminist research and analysis on the disciplines and to take an overview of *Women's Studies*, while we were finishing *Women in Print*. (*En*)*Gendering Knowledge*, as we finally called it, appeared in 1991, after Ellen began teaching at the University of Minnesota, where she still is, with appointments in English, Women's Studies, Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, and American Studies.

Since then she has published on feminist, interdisciplinary, and political issues, particularly on the New or Christian Right, its ideology, and its organizing strategies. In *Disciplining Feminism* she pulls many of these concerns together. She argues that women's studies, which at its inception promised wide social change, was bifurcated and appropriated, academic feminism by the disciplinary structures of the academy and extramural feminism by the forces of social conservatism, and that we need strategies to revive its promise by creating change both intramurally and extramurally. Graduate students I think stand at a somewhat similar juncture: that is, they want to be appropriated by the disciplinary structures of the academy while the academy itself is bending to extramural pressures of accountability and the mandates of politically appointed Boards of Trustees--as well as a war against the young and the poor that has eroded their claims to a fair share of national resources.

Ellen's a sharp analyst of the intellectual, social, and political scene. But, unlike many academics, she doesn't stop there. As early as an essay called "Know-How" that she wrote for (*En*)*Gendering Knowledge* (it appears in a section called "Academic Knowledge and Social Change"), she criticized academics for

remaining mired in analysis while the New Right organizes and gets things done. We need to emulate their political activism and organizational savvy, she argues, to forward our more humane and more sensible projects.

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