

Oral History Transcript

John Broesamle Suddenly a Giant: A History of CSUN Collection

Interviewee Elizabeth Berry = EB

Interviewed by John Broesamle = JB

Interview conducted on May 22, 1989 at an unspecified location

Transcribed by: Cameron Takahashi

Edited by: Philip Walsh

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Biographical Note:

Elizabeth Berry earned her B.A. from Northwestern University and her Ph.D. from UCLA. From 1969 to 1973, she was part time faculty in the Department of Speech Communication, and was hired to the tenure track in 1973. Berry was instrumental in the creation of what is now the Women's Studies Department, serving as its first coordinator, and is the recipient of a CSUN Gender and Women's Studies Phenomenal Woman Award. She has served as the CFA faculty rights chair and as Associate Vice President for Academic Programs. She retired in 2007.

Interview Transcription

Tape 1, Side A

JB: Elizabeth, you arrived in 1973. How was the general atmosphere for women on this campus? Women, faculty and administrators, different then than it is now?

EB: Well, I had been here before as a part-timer, and I had young children, so I was really only teaching before that. And not being involved at all in the university. 1973, I was appointed as, a, tenure track position. And I do remember being asked about how, if I moved into the tenure track position, what I would do with the children, how I would take care of the children.

JB: You were asked that in the hiring process?

EB: Yes. And at that point, I knew enough to say that I wouldn't—it wouldn't be a problem, that it never had been a problem, even though it really had been a problem, but nobody knew about it, I made it seem as if everything would be fine. I also knew enough not to say that that question was inappropriate, as a matter of fact, I'm not even sure if that question was inappropriate or illegal at that time. I'm not sure that kin—those kind of guidelines about asking questions was illegal, I don't know when that came in.

JB: Might have been 1973, as a matter of fact.

EB: Yeah.

JB: Was the questioner a man or a woman?

EB: Man. Asked me. Person who was in charge of hiring. Who was chair of the department.

JB: The question would be quite out of line today, wouldn't it?

EB: Yes, would be. And I think at least now, those questions—for a while, those questions were asked even if they were illegal. Because people knew that they could get by with those questions, because the interviewee wouldn't want to sound argumentative or whatever, defensive. So, the woman, often, would not say—you know, that's an illegal question. In fact, there have been a number of articles in different women's magazines—journalist, journals, about how to get around those kinds of questions without offending the person who asked the question. But still not answering the question. But in '73, the women's movement was really starting to, of course, become nationally prominent and there were a few of us who were interested in women's issues. But, I didn't know many people here, I only knew people in my department, because I didn't—I wasn't on any committees, university committees. I do remember that there were a couple of women, one was Jane Prather, and then there were—it was Linda Fidel, and Michelle Wittig, who I believe had been teaching, or introduced some courses on women in their departments. And at that time, Mary McEdwards and I started exploring the idea of teaching a course in our department. And we introduced a course, *The Rhetoric of Sexual Liberation*, at that time, and it was an experimental course, and it had fifteen people in it, and it soon became very, very popular. But there was no organization, there was no, what I call, women's network, we were really not even aware of what the problems were.

JB: Would you elaborate on that just a bit, in terms of that lack of awareness of the problems, was feminism dawning on you at the time, as well?

[00:04:34]

EB: Yes. I read—I remember reading *The Female Eunuch*, I had read *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, and I had really—I think just—let's see, I graduated in 1960, and fell into the kind of traditional pattern, in many ways, that women of the '50s did. The difference was that I always had this urge to continue to go to school. And so, then, I kept going on and getting more degrees, which was different. But as I never had the goal of going to get a Ph.D. I graduated from college, thought I'd teach, which I did in public schools, then I decided I'd go get a Master's degree, so I got a Master's degree, and that was gonna be it, then I went back to high school teaching, I had been teaching in Junior High, and decided that running these debate tournaments every weekend wasn't what I wanted to do, and so I applied to UCLA, and I thought, I really applied to UCLA graduate school just to pursue my education. And I had always thought well, you know, I probably won't. I never thought of getting a Ph.D., I never thought of it. Even when I was in graduate

school, I thought, Well I probably won't finish this, but it's fun while I'm here. And then I passed one language(??), and then I passed another lang—(??), and I kept going on and on, and pretty soon I was finished. And then, when I was finished, I didn't really have any idea what I would do, whether I'd go look for a job, and I had young children, I had had one child in '65 and one child in '68 and I got my degree in '69, my Ph.D. So, I was thinking, Oh well, I guess I'll teach part time. And I had no goals beyond that.

JB: You were the so-called nontraditional or returning student. Kind of in perpetuity, wouldn't you say?

EB: Yes, yes. Maybe that's why I identify with them.

JB: Uh huh. Do you think of yourself as a feminist today?

EB: Yes. And no, and I'm not gonna say, "I'm not a feminist but." I am a feminist.

JB: Can you pinpoint the year or the approximate year in which you—

EB: Clicked—

JB: —came to that identification as—

EB: —as they say? No, it was an ongoing—I think, when I look back on it, in 1960, I remember giving a talk to my graduating group of women, which was in a sorority, I was the president of a sorority, and I remember giving a talk to them, saying, it was a very serious talk, and they were surprised because I was very, you know, I wasn't known for my serious side. And I talked about how, as educated women, it was almost pre-*Feminine Mystique*, as educated women, we must continue pursuing our learning, and that we—I remember one line, we should read the books, not the book reviews, and gave this message. Then in '63, when I read that *The Feminine Mystique*, I do remember this. As part of our Ph.D. entry program, we had to do some kind of little oral presentation, just as an entry. And you could give a talk on anything you wanted. And this must have been in '64, I think. And I talked about *The Feminine Mystique*. And of course, none of the male professors had read it. And it was—but it did hit me, I was one of those that it really did strike home with, cause she was talking to people like me. White middle-class women with a college degree. And I just kept reading, and reading, and then, I think being at the university, becoming involved with women students, teaching my classes, it just was an evolutionary process.

JB: When you arrived in tenured status, here we are in the—

EB: Tenure track status, you mean?

JB: Tenure track status, I'm sorry. We're here in the early 1970's. You've been here as a part timer for some time prior to that. You were asked this particular question, which by present standards was rather a leading question. Did anything else set your teeth on edge, or did you find a fairly accommodating setting? For example, let me give you a particular example. The course, Rhetoric of Sexual Liberation, was there resistance on that course by the male faculty?

[00:09:55]

EB: Oh yes, and it was looked at as kind of a free course. Except that, I was team teaching it with Mary McEdwards, and—who was—had been around longer, who was known to be outspoken and strong and an excellent teacher, so I was linked with her, so I think that helped with the course getting off the ground. And there was—I think almost, you know, I don't even think about so much resistance, I think they thought it was so silly that it didn't even need to be resisted. So, I don't remember within the department, a lot of flak about that particular course. I do remember when we went to get it as a—an upper division course, that was a lower division course, when we—in a few years, when we decided we wanted to have another course, taking that course to the Educational Policy Committee, and having a lot of snide comments about an upper division course and what is there to study here.

JB: Is there anything else that comes to mind among these lines, anything that would surprise you now, in the early or mid-'70s, which perhaps didn't surprise you then?

EB: Well, the interesting thing to me when I look back is, that I'm sure the university was as political as it is now. But I was so ignorant about university politics, and how do you have to play the game, and what do you have to do, that I think it's a good thing I was, but we just decided this was an interesting program that we should pursue. I do remember that—I think I was still a part-timer, there was a group of women who met on Friday afternoons, and I don't even—a lot of them aren't here, but I believe Jane and Michelle were there, I can't remember, there was a woman from Philosophy who's no longer here, and there were some other part-timers, and we met to talk about developing some women's studies courses and maybe even a minor. But it was—and we met in somebody's home, I can remember driving in— or meeting somewhere where nobody would know we were meeting.

JB: Is that right?

EB: Yeah!

JB: Was this—would you describe this, in any sense, as a consciousness raising group per se, or did you meet for curricular purposes?

EB: We met for curricular purposes, but it became a consciousness raising—I mean, it's real foggy, I don't even remember the people. A lot of them were part-timers, a lot of them were, I imagine, young women who were becoming aware of these different kinds of curricular ideas that were starting to become published and publicized. In conjunction with the women's study—with the women's move—see, the Women Studies Program is the political offshoot of the women's movement, just as Pan-African Studies and Chicana Studies wouldn't have probably emerged had there not been political protests. Women's Studies emerged out of the political arena as opposed to, for example, Anthropology or History. They didn't emerge out of any kind of social/political movement, they've been here forever, right? (both laugh) Since the 15th century.

JB: For a historian, that's a leading question.

EB: Yeah. But, so, there was always that political—when I say I was naïve politically, I was naïve or ignorant politically about the university, but not necessarily about what was going on about the Civil Rights movement, and the far left, and all those other movements, there was a definite connection. So—so there was an interesting connection between the two.

JB: What year did the meetings begin?

EB: I don't remember. I know it was before '78 because the EPC [Educational Policy Committee] subcommittee was formed—no, let's see, '77 was when we submitted our report, convened October '76, that was the subcommittee on women's studies. Convened October 20th, '76. Which meant that in the spring of '76, that committee was probably appointed. So, it was prior to that. And I was either an—a part timer or a very new person in the Speech Department.

JB: Could you talk just a bit about the process by which that program was established? What did it take to get the program set up?

[00:14:51]

EB: Okay, it was—Educational Policy Committee established a—as they do, a subcommittee on—to look into the feasibility of establishing a Women Studies Program minor—or program on this campus. I don't think it was necessarily that we were to look into a department or a major or minor, we were trying to look at whether or not to—what kind of program should evolve. And the—looking over the people—I was an assistant professor, Richard Camp was professor of history, Virginia Elwood, Pamela Lickmann was a graduate assistant in Geography, Jeannette Mann, Dorothy Meyer, Evelyn Michaelson, Donna Rudy, Iris Shaw, and Margaret Thompson. And we met regularly, we met a lot during those first couple of—about a year, and what we were trying to do was establish that women's studies was legitimate. That was one of the big things that we had to do, was to establish that this was a legitimate field of

inquiry. So, we did a lot of searching about what was going on throughout the country. And we—we called—we looked, particularly in our sister institutions, but throughout the country—and at that point, and I just read somewhere, there are, you know, out ten thousand courses or something like that now, there were, like, two hundred and seventy six courses, and we tried to develop—the major part of our writing and our thought, I remember, was discussing how to present this and how to define women's studies, and how to answer questions that we knew would be raised about it. So, our document that was prepared—and I can say after all these years of looking at curriculum, this is still, I think, one of the best reports that's ever been submitted to the Educational Policy Committee for a new program. But, as usual, women had to be better. And they were. And as somebody says, fortunately that's not difficult. So, we—what we did, and I remember thinking about this—because of my debate training, we must try anticipatory rebuttals. So, we had the definition of what women's studies is, and what it was not. We were very concerned that it would be seen as a legitimate academic program, not as consciousness raising. Cause during this period of time, everybody was saying, well it's just a fad, and all they do is sit around, and it's a consciousness raising program. And we wanted it very clearly established that we were going to be an academic program.

JB: Did that mean the program would lack ideology?

EB: Well, no. No, not necessarily. But, we had to establish that there was an ideology and that there were different ideologies. At that time—See, the women's movement at that time was also still just trying to form an ideology. And they weren't—they were still new enough or insecure enough not to be able to admit that there might be different ideologies within the women's movement. Now we talk about feminisms. We talk about various ideologies within feminism. At that point, we're trying to establish a framework for study. And, you know, it was very interesting because, here, all these people—none of these people have degrees in this so-called women's studies or feminist studies, so we were really looking for—kind of an academic framework which we could use to develop further courses and form the kind of scholarship and research that we wanted done. But it was—so we were doing two things, we were trying to look at what other people were doing, and we were also trying to frame our own. And at the same time, being very careful not to make it sound like a consciousness raising group. Two things we did, one was—or one thing I realize now, that was probably smart that we did, we did keep it very academic and we tried to have very strict kinds of guidelines for the academic content of the courses, but of course, women's studies is consciousness raising no matter what you do, and the information and academic content of the course raises people's consciousness just as sitting around talking about your problems and your impressions does, I think even more so. The other thing we did—

JB: Let me interject.

EB: Yeah, go ahead.

JB: You knew that going in.

EB: Yeah.

JB: That is, you knew that, if not the manifest function, as sociologists put it, the latent function, or latent result of this, would be consciousness raising just by virtue of the fact that these problems were being discussed.

[00:20:06]

EB: Yeah. And pri—and we also thought that those people who take our courses already were—had a propensity towards this, that was before GE [general education]. And I want to talk about the shift that came in the teaching of the courses after those were GE courses. The other thing we did was to separate ourselves out from the Women's Center.

JB: Why was that?

EB: That was because the Women's Center, at that time, was just getting off the ground too, although it had been in existence longer. And it was seen as a group of quite radical feminists. They were—now, I'm trying to think. There was one point in time where there was a very definite group of lesbians who were involved in the Women's Center, and that were, I think a number of people on the committee felt, they didn't want to hook up with the Women's Center for several reasons. One was that it was too much looked at as the consciousness-raising—consciousness raising radical—although I don't think they were very radical—maybe too many lesbians in that Women's Center at that time, there was just a fear that this Women Studies Program had to be so academic and so—we were really quite conservative in our approach as opposed to Long Beach. Long Beach went completely the different way. And consciously did that, too.

JB: To what extent was the conservatism a function of political realities of getting this program approved, and to what extent was it a function of your own attitudes at the time, as a group?

EB: It was probably both. I mean, I look at that list, there weren't any real radicals on that group. I think I—I think part—I think it was both. I think if we had been a different group, even knowing the political realities, we would've stood up for being much more openly ideological and openly more radical than we were in this very conservative document.

JB: Am I right in my assumption, this wasn't a foot-in-the-door approach, where the program would be framed in moderate tones and terms, and then would branch out in radical directions later, it was never intended?

EB: That's right, I would think so, yeah.

JB: What compromises were necessary to get it through? What had to be compromised and changed as the proposal passed through committees?

EB: Well, I think—one of the things that we did that I started to say, was we framed it—first of all, we had to define what we meant by women's studies and what it is, and then this section, I remember this section, writing this, "Replies to some arguments against women's studies." And for example, a common argument used against having either specialized or discipline-based courses on, or women's studies courses, is they are not needed, because there are no men's studies courses. We argued against that. Gayle Spinner has a line where she calls women's studies "men's studies modified." (Both laugh) And then, she said—and then we talk about—another argument is that there already are courses and whole fields about women, such as home economics, office management, nursing. And so then, we argue why that isn't adequate. Another one is one based on either, there's not enough material and the field is decreasing.

JB: Decreasing.

EB: Yeah. Information on the trends in current states of the field can speak for itself, we say. And then we show the kind of argument. One final argument preferred by some is that women studies programs should be an instance of sex discrimination and thereby—would be an instance of sex discrimination and thereby prohibited under Title IX.

JB: Were these real—Were these arguments really raised by men faculty?

EB: Yeah, yes! Well, we just—I mean, we didn't make them up. I don't know where they came from. I remember us saying, we have got to answer these questions before they're thrown at us, I think that was very smart. And then, we had a section on trend and current status of women's studies, this is amazing. As of 1975, there were women's studies courses on over nine hundred university campuses, and four thousand two hundred and twenty-four teachers of women's studies employed. Now, it's just thousands. Course, there are Ph.D.'s in the field, and there's all sorts of programs and courses and so forth and it's—and as you know, the material is—you can't keep up with it.

[00:25:01]

JB: Were we running about abreast in the national trend with the establishment of women's studies—

EB: Well, we were a little late. I think, in California, twelve of the nineteen CSUC campuses have programs with one having a B.A. degree, and two having—this was in 1976—and they—

—five of the nine University of California campuses have formal programs, including UC Santa Cruz, has a Ph.D. program, and they still do, and it's a good program.

JB: These are departmental programs, it's certainly a Ph.D. program, would be departmental. Why doesn't ours a department?

EB: Well, that's been discussed off and on. There were some people who wanted to go for departmental status, and as I remember, we went for the minor—in fact, you mentioned, you asked whether or not we thought of foot-in-the-door and then we'd get more radical—I think we did think we'd go for a minor and then maybe move to a major. We did think along those lines, we thought it would be easier to get a minor than going for a major. But that, we didn't rule out that possibility. I think that, in terms of why we are not a department, we've talked about it off and on, women's studies committees, and we need the coalition of people to do that, for one thing, and the second thing is resources. There is such a problem that I think people just feel that it wouldn't fly. But it's not—

JB: It wouldn't fly with the department?

EB: Yeah, but I don't think it's out of the question, I mean, it could still happen.

JB: If this had been proposed when Pan-African Studies or Chicano Studies were established, if this had been a proposal pending in the late '60s, do you think this might have been established as a department than—was the resource stringency of the mid-70's starting to impact them?

EB: I think so, yeah. Probably. I don't know. But I think that that's probably true.

JB: You mentioned the change in the courses when this went to GE. What happened?

EB: Yeah. Well, that was very interesting because I was coordinating the Women Studies 200 courses, and I was no longer the coordinator of Women Studies, but I was still working with Women Studies. And I was Associate Dean of CAMPS [Communication and Professional Studies] at that time. And we started having these weekly meeting—er, monthly meetings about women's studies, and everybody started saying, You know, these students are different. What's different? And we realized that we were getting general education students before this course was approved for general education. And when it first came in, it wasn't in GE. And we had to scramble to make the course. I mean, it took a lot of publicity, and hustling, and getting people into the Women Studies 200, Women Studies 300, Women Studies 400. We had a couple of sections. When we started, we had one section of Women Studies 200, and Sandra Hale was the first teacher. And she was the only one we could find who felt comfortable enough in teaching Women Studies 200 because none of us felt that we knew enough. And she really was, and still is, this kind of Renaissance person who had Anthropology, Art,

History, I forget what other areas she's familiar with, and she was the first woman to teach—first person to teach Women Studies 200, we had one course. And we had two or three a semester. And then it got approved for general education. So, we started getting students who were only there because it was general education, who had not a clue what Women Studies was all about. We got people who—we still didn't get very many males in the course, but it was a whole change in the background of the students and the interest and the attitude of the students. And it took about a year before we realized what—that we had to change our assumptions about teaching the class and how to approach the class, and do different things.

JB: But the students, the original students that come in with, at least a partial, preexisting raised consciousness, but now you're getting people who are simply taking a course.

EB: Absolutely. That's right. And it was a—there was a distinct difference.

JB: Did it change the faculty that taught the course? Is, that is to say, not just the way in which they taught the courses, but the actual composition of the faculty teaching the courses?

EB: Well, it expanded it because we needed more sections then, so we got more people teaching the course. But we had a kind of a congeries of people, but we did advertise in the University Bulletin, and we tried to get—because interdisciplinary programs are always at the, you know, always at the whims of deans and faculty on campus who were interested in teaching it. One thing about Women Studies, is we've always—we've never had problems, as from what I understand, of getting faculty to teach the courses. They enjoy it.

[00:30:14]

JB: So, there's been no resistance there. Has there been significant resistance, really from the beginning, on through, in terms of getting the program established, in terms of mounting the courses, in terms of getting the courses in GE, how much resistance has there been to Women Studies along the line?

EB: Well, by the time we moved into being the—a minor, well, first of all, a couple more anecdotes on it. The program was established, and approved by EPC. And I remember—again, I had never been to EPC in my life—and we went, and Margaret Thompson was chair of the committee, and she did a fantastic job of writing this report. And Jeanette Mann did, too. I remember the two that were particularly as being very interested in the details that we would present, and getting—for example, we had a whole section which was used to describe what somebody with a minor in Women Studies might be able to do. You know, there was always that practical, Well, so why would anybody want to do this? We came up with jobs that they would have, in fact, this—we Xeroxed this and sent it to other programs who—

[END OF TRACK 1]