

Personal Reflections on the Career of a Squeaky Wheel

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Becoming a Squeaky Wheel

I can still remember the day on May 24, 1974 when I sat across the desk from Philip Leis, Chair of the Anthropology Department at Brown University, and he told me that I would not be getting tenure. I would have one more year of teaching at Brown and then be out of a job. He measured his words carefully when I asked him the reason that the six tenured males in the department had not recommended me to the Provost, Merton Stolz, who had in turn ratified their decision. He said that the faculty had been “evenly divided,” that my teaching was “poor but not so much worse than others,” and that my essay in the newly published collection (*Woman, Culture and Society*, 1974, co-edited with the late Shelly Rosaldo who taught at Stanford) revealed “an extremely weak theoretical orientation.”

The department had held off the decision until late in the semester (a bad sign I suspected) and I was just learning of the decision a week before graduation. My initial reaction was one of anger. “This can’t be happening to me,” I thought, yet I felt I had to do something about it. I remember leaving his office shaken but with determination. I spent the next ten days frantically trying to contact Provost Stolz, Donald Hornig, Brown’s President, and Jacqueline Mattfeld, the only woman administrator. I was told that there would be no appointments during the next week before graduation. After receiving a letter giving me the gist of the department’s reasons for not supporting tenure, I wrote a letter to President Hornig that was never answered. I spoke briefly with Jacqueline Mattfeld, on her way home for a pre-graduation luncheon. She told me “her hands were tied.” My memory of this period is one of knocking on a number of doors, but being refused. I felt I had no one to turn to and no place to go within the university structure.

On the bright and sunny graduation afternoon, I attended the departmental ceremony on the lawn outside our building and asked Phil if I could speak to him privately in his office. I told him I had hired a lawyer; I intended to sue. This was my squeaky wheel moment, letting the Department know I was not going away quietly and propelling me on a trajectory that resulted in a Title VII sex discrimination lawsuit against Brown University.

My last year at Brown, 1974-75, was spent going through the internal grievance procedure that only allowed me to raise procedural issues, although I brought up the issue of sex discrimination (arguing that my teaching and scholarship on women adversely influenced the decision and was a denial of my academic freedom). The result of

this process was a “pro-forma” review of my case by the Academic Council, which ratified the Department’s decision. The Grievance Committee’s report was forwarded to the Brown Corporation, which accepted the report but not its findings. By this time, May 1975, my lawyer Milton Stanzler and his nephew Jordan Stanzler, had helped me to file a “Class Action” suit under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. I not only alleged that I had been discriminated against but argued that Brown had engaged in a pattern and practice of discrimination on the basis of sex that impacted all women in the class; i.e., those women faculty then employed at Brown, those who might have been employed at Brown (but for discrimination in hiring) and those who might become employed there in the future.

The Class Action was not certified until July 1976, allowing three other women to enter the case. In the meantime, we had started the discovery process in which we were allowed to ask the university “interrogatories” or questions in order to gather the information to prove our case. The university stonewalled at every point, refusing us access to university files and to relevant notes and letters in the hands of individual faculty members. In the end, we had to go to court to get these documents.

It was during a deposition of Phil Leis, the Anthropology Department Chair in the late summer of 1976 that we found “the smoking gun,” a series of letters between Phil and George Hicks, one of my tenured colleagues who was on leave during 1973-74. I have a vivid memory of sitting in a small room in the office of the University’s law firm during a lunch break. Under the watchful eyes of one of the firm’s women clerical workers, Susan Benson (my housemate and a history professor) and I poured over the letters, barely able to contain our shock at the contents with muffled whispers, “Did you see that?” and “Can you **believe** this?”

From these letters it was not only clear that both men had opposed my tenure, but that they had colluded in doing so. George wrote an appraisal of my contributions to the department that hardly mentioned my scholarship. Instead, he ranted on about the lecture I had given on Margaret Mead in his introductory course. He alleged that I had turned the lecture to “sexism in America and delivered a generalized diatribe against institutional sexism.” He concluded that my presentation was “treacherous to students” and irresponsible. Phil replied by return mail that if he really cared about my not getting tenure, he should say something more about my “not very outstanding publications.” He would then cut off the last few lines of the original letter and add the new page to it. Furthermore, it was clear from the letters the George had pressured one of the graduate students to write a negative letter against my tenure.

Having gotten our hands on this correspondence, we had powerful enough material to win a case in court. The letters were also filled with disturbing and often sexist remarks about women students, colleagues, and female acquaintances. This was the turning point of the case and a major “ahaa!” moment for me as well. I had thought up to the time of the decision that George Hicks had been my supporter and close friend. My letters to him in this period are naïve in my expectation that he would write a positive letter regarding my tenure. I had been less sure of what Phil’s opinion was, but had been stunned to read his opinions of me that were part of the Departmental letter that he wrote to the Provost. My article in *Woman, Culture and Society* (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974) was atrocious in his view and showed that I had difficulty “going beyond descriptive statements to analytical or synthetic propositions.” In sum, he wrote, “Her excursion into comparative cultural analysis reveals an extremely weak theoretical orientation.” No actual vote was taken, but Phil construed the opinions of one of his colleagues as positive, two as in the middle, George’s letter as negative, leaving him to “cast” the second and negative vote.

During 1976 and 1977 we prepared for a trial. In the meantime, the university was spending over a million dollars in legal fees on the case (a great deal of money in the 1970s). It was clear that a trial that would involve faculty in four departments would really stop the business of the university for much of a semester and bring unwanted negative publicity. Howard Swearer, the new President of Brown, indicated in the spring of 1977 that he was willing to talk about a settlement. After the four plaintiffs met privately with him, we began negotiations to settle the case, meeting with two teams of lawyers, representatives of the administration and a faculty committee to begin to hammer out the details of a Consent Decree.

The Consent Decree was signed in September 1977. It provided tenure for me and two other women and a cash settlement for the fourth plaintiff. It set up a procedure whereby women who had felt discriminated against by Brown in the past could claim damages, and \$400,000 was set aside for such claims. An Affirmative Action Monitoring Committee was created to monitor hiring, tenure, and promotion at Brown, and new procedures were instituted for hiring, annual reviews, and the tenure process. Most importantly, the university committed itself to a series of Goals and Timetables to hire 100 women and 57 tenured women by 1987. I returned to Brown in 1979 as a full-time associate professor of Anthropology.

Reflections after Three Decades

The success of my case was perhaps the result of “a perfect storm.” Title VII law was in its beginning stages as applied to universities and the burden of proof was still on the university to prove that it had not discriminated. There

were no tenured female faculty in my department and in the other social science departments at Brown. We had an excellent Judge, Raymond Pettine, and without him we may never have certified the Class Action or obtained as many internal documents. The Class Action made it a much more difficult case for the university to fight, with four plaintiffs and a larger class, rather than a lone woman plaintiff. Very few women who sued universities in this period were victorious. Emily Abel (1981:505-38) interviewed 20 women who had filed charges of sex discrimination, but I was the only one who had obtained a resolution I considered satisfactory.

Suing Brown was the most important thing I have done. I learned two things: first that it is possible to change a university (and transforming an institution creates much more permanent change than the resolution of one person’s situation.) Second, the creation of a support network and the help of close friends is absolutely essential to continuing to push forward. Many times during those years, especially when the Department was being so secretive about the tenure process and in the months after the decision and during the internal grievance procedure, I had many doubts about my own abilities. (Emily Abel also found this pattern among her interviewees). Maybe my teaching was “poor,” maybe I did mumble and have distracting mannerisms when I lectured. Maybe my work showed a lack of critical ability and perhaps my research on women was atrocious. I can remember a number of dinners in our collective house when my partner Peter Evans and my housemates would adamantly argue against all of my weak-kneed statements that “They might be right after all.” Only consistent support from a close circle of friends and colleagues were enough to shore up my confidence when it lagged.

Finally, the case owed some of its success to larger forces: a vibrant feminist movement, an increasing number of women in Ph.D. programs in Anthropology and across the social sciences and humanities, and the growing momentum for women’s rights in the context of an atmosphere that saw affirmative action as an important and necessary step in improving the situation of women and minorities.

After Lamphere vs. Brown

So what can a Squeaky Wheel do once she is inside the university with a secure tenured position? Since 1977, I have devoted a good deal of my career to continuing to change institutions so they provide a more welcoming place for women (especially minority women) and to building support networks through mentoring and teaching. I have not been alone in this effort. I have joined many other women in transforming anthropology into a discipline that has attracted a majority of women and has supported research on women of differing classes, race/ethnicities and sexual orientations both in the U.S. and around the globe.

My own activities have focused on creating and sustaining a culture of social support by mentoring students, bringing minority and women scholars from the past into the center of my teaching and writing, and working to promote more successful minority Ph.D. in the humanistic social sciences. This also includes a commitment to institution building. From 1994 -1996, I directed the Women Studies at the University of New Mexico and chaired the Association for Feminist Anthropology (AFA) from 1995 - 1997. I followed Mary Moran as Chair of AFA, an organization founded by Naomi Quinn, Sylvia Forman, and Carole Hill in 1988. By the time I was able to be Chair elect and Chair we were in a phase of expanding and strengthening the AFA as a place for feminist research as well as support and mentoring for younger scholars.

The 1995 meetings provided an opportunity to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the publication of *Woman, Culture and Society* (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974) and *Towards an Anthropology of Women* (Rapp 1975). The January 1996 AFA newsletter illustrates some of our institution-building strategies. Articles show that the research and teaching interests of our members were broadening to emphasize race and gender and the increasing importance of the global women's movement (as epitomized by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing). We were also focused on supporting graduate students. We awarded our first Sylvia Forman Prize for the best student paper, a tradition that still continues. We also began to incorporate more women of color in the AFA's leadership. Maria-Louisa Urdaneta and Windance Twine joined the AFA Board in 1995. Cheryl Rodriguez was the Anthropology News AFA column editor and currently serves as the AFA Chair.

At UNM, where I taught first while I was fighting the case against Brown (1976-79) and then again from 1986 to my retirement in January 2009, I also worked to sustain institutions for feminist research. I was Interim Director and Academic Coordinator of Women Studies (1993-95), editor of *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* (1990-93) and Director of the Feminist Research Institute (1997-98). Our efforts at UNM in building Women Studies were not entirely successful during the early 1990s, since we lost the salary of a full-time director and two joint faculty appointments when the women holding these positions left Women Studies for full-time departmental affiliations. I was involved in holding together what was left: a program dependent on part-time instructors and graduate students. This situation has continued until recently when a more stable Director position was initiated and a joint appointment with American Studies was established. Despite a Women Studies Major and a graduate certificate in Women Studies, the program still remains small and marginal within Arts and Sciences.

As President of the American Anthropological

Association, I became head of an organization that included a majority of female members and one of a growing number of female Presidents, section leaders, and journal editors. During the last forty years Anthropology has gone from a male-dominated to a female dominated profession. But there is more concern with training and supporting women of color and minority men within Anthropology. In my own teaching and in my Presidential address (Lamphere 2004) I have focused on bringing the work of women (including minority women) and minority men from the margins to the center of the discipline. Not only the work of Elsie Clews Parsons, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, but that of Ella Deloria and Zora Neale Hurston need to be on our reading lists and taught in our graduate theory and ethnography seminars. Undergraduate classes need more than just a smattering of reading by and about women of color and women in developing countries.

More important is intellectual and financial support for lesbian and minority women students and young untenured faculty members. The UNM Anthropology Department does not have a very good track record. Very few of the minority students (both male and female) who begin our M.A. and PH.D. programs complete these degrees. Over the past three years I have worked hard to obtain and help administer a Mellon Fellowship Program for Hispano and Native American students in Anthropology and five other departments. We now have ten fellows in the program and are graduating our first two Ph.D.'s in December 2009. By May 2013, we hope to have 20 students who have completed and defended their doctoral dissertations. The grant is helping to create a community of young scholars who are mentored and become part of a circle of faculty and students interested in qualitative, collaborative research with local communities. Helping these students through the hurdles of submitting funding applications, completing their field research, presenting professional papers, and writing a dissertation are all goals of this grant.

During the last few years our gay and lesbian students have found a more supportive department as two Department Chairs have been lesbian or gay. Lesbians are freer to be "out" and are able to form support networks of like-minded straight and gay feminists. On the other hand some students are nervous that their dissertation topics on lesbian or gay topics will not receive as much support and enthusiasm from faculty or funding agencies. These examples illustrate the continued need for support networks and mentoring. Just as with my struggle at Brown, a strong network of peers and mentors is essential to taking advantage of changing institutional opportunities.

Conclusions

So where are we now? We still need "squeaky wheels" – those faculty and students who are willing to continue

to transform institutions and to build support networks for women, as well as to engage a public anthropology that concerns itself with the critical social issues that impact women, both in the U.S. and in other parts of the world. We are not doing a good enough job training and mentoring the minority women in anthropology- as undergraduates, as graduate Ph.D. students, and as young untenured assistant professors. Lesbian and gay students often lack faculty mentors and a sense that their research interests are legitimate. We need to keep classes on women, gender, sexuality and globalization as top priorities in our undergraduate and graduate curricula. Very few courses (and almost no actual positions) exist on sexuality in most departments, and the competition for minority faculty is such that a department with several minority faculty one year may find themselves losing their colleagues to greener pastures in the next. Feminist anthropology needs to be a “big tent,” that includes all those who examine gender, race, class, and/or sexuality in a globalizing context. As we look towards the future, we need to continue to find ways feminist anthropology and gender studies to be a catalyst for innovation and a place for valuing our feminist heritage.

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Sylvia Forman Prize

2009 Silvia Forman Award Winners

Graduate award

Vanessa Agard-Jones (NYU), “Le Jeu di Qui? Sexual Politics at Play in the French Caribbean (paper for Dr. Lila Abu Lughod, advised by Dr. Aisha Khan)

Undergraduate award

Tiffany Black (U of New Hampshire), “Conceptualizing the Two-Spirit Gender of Native North Americans: Occupation is Where It’s at, not Sexuality (advised by Dr. Ellie Harrison-Buck)

2008 Silvia Forman Award Winners

Graduate award

Csilla Kalocsai (Yale University), “Limits of the Entrepreneurial Subject: Gender, Generation and Time in Hungary’s New Economy” (advised by Kamari Clark)
Jessica Smith (University of Michigan), “Jumbled Talk, Confused Women: Technology and the Gendering of Expertise in Wyoming Coal Mines” (advised by Stuart Kirsch & Barbara Meek)

Undergraduate award

Aashika Damodar (University of California, Berkeley), “No ‘Pretty Woman’: The Politics of the Trafficked Victim” (advised by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Lawrence Cohen)

AFA is pleased to invite graduate and undergraduate students to submit essays in feminist anthropology in competition for the Sylvia Forman Prize, named for the late Sylvia Helen Forman, one of the founders of AFA, whose dedication to both her students and feminist principles contributed to the growth of feminist anthropology. The winners, one graduate student and one undergraduate student, will receive a certificate; a cash award (\$1,000 graduate and \$500 undergraduate); and have their essay summaries published in the Anthropology Newsletter.

We encourage essays in all four subfields of anthropology. Essays may be based on research on a wide variety of topics including (but not limited to) feminist analysis of women’s work, reproduction, sexuality, religion, language and expressive culture, family and kin relations, economic development, gender and material culture, gender and biology, women and development, globalization, and the intersectionality of gender, race, and class. Please Check the AFA web page for details of the 2010 competition:

<http://www.aaanet.org/sections/afa/forman.html>