

Over a year ago, my colleague, Charles Irby, asked me to “share the history and deal with the current dimensions” of the Ethnic and Women’s Studies Department at Cal Poly Pomona. Since Chuck’s death in June, 1987, I have often thought of him as I was both writing and not writing this article, as I have attended to departmental activities, and, of course as I have wandered through my thoughts in the course of many days. Of all my departmental colleagues, he most understood the necessity and validity of race/class/gender analysis in intellectual life. We talked and argued for hours. He was often infuriating. He was always engaging. He gave of himself as he demanded of others. He refused to be ignored.

Ethnic and Women’s Studies: An Attempt at Educating in the Academy

Lillian H. Jones

As I have written before in other places, the Ethnic and Women’s Studies Department at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona is a unique academic department in its history, structure, and ultimately in its agenda. The fact that Ethnic and Women’s Studies are combined in a setting where the two disciplines are more frequently suspicious if not hostile to each other is unusual and owes its partnership to the history of the university where it exists and to particular individuals who conceived it. This combination, while certainly subject to both political and philosophical criticism from a variety of voices and interests, is one that rests on the assumption that the “brother isms”—racism, sexism, and classicism—are, in harmony, appropriate organizing phenomena in both analyzing the American experience, and in exploring, in a global context, the American present and future.

Because I am a historian, I have a notion that contemporary explanations and analysis require beginning at the beginning. And, there is a context within which both the beginning and the present exist. Therefore, to understand the Ethnic and Women’s Studies Department, one needs to understand what institution it exists within and how it evolved. Cal Poly Pomona is one of the nineteen campuses in the California State University System, the largest state system in the country. Our campus is one of two polytechnic universities in this system, where the emphasis is on professional and technical training in such areas as engineering, business, computer science, architecture and agriculture. The largest college on campus is the College of Arts, actually a heterogeneous grouping combining the liberal arts, fine and performing arts, hu-

manities, and social sciences. This college provides most of the general education for the entire campus as well as courses for its twenty-four majors. It is in this college that the Ethnic and Women's Studies Department exists. The orientation of most students who come to Cal Poly Pomona is to gain professional training to get a job. The university sits on the eastern end of Los Angeles County in a polyethnic metropolitan area; it is 55% white and 57% male. The campus is located in a semi-rural setting with a student population of approximately 18,300.

In 1972, during a period of political turmoil, the first separate ethnic studies centers were established on campus. From this beginning, the Ethnic Studies Department formed when these centers were combined and given departmental status in 1978. Founding faculty were tenured in Ethnic Studies and were selected for their expertise in Afroamerican Studies, Chicano/Hispanic Studies, and American Indian Studies. In 1979, the first class dealing with women as a focus was offered. It was initiated by the chair of Ethnic Studies, Charles Irby. This was an Ethnic Studies course with a focus on female health and sexuality and was team-taught by a black male from Ethnic Studies and a white female whose training was in psychology. It became a sought-after class on this rather conservative campus, most probably because of what was considered its controversial content. In 1980, Yolanda Moses, a black, female anthropologist became chair of the department. She revamped the women's course, added additional courses, deleted others, and proceeded to create a full-fledged Women's Studies curriculum within the Ethnic Studies Department. At that time, no other department on campus had an interest in women's issues or women's scholarship even though women's studies nationwide was at least ten years old.

At Cal Poly Pomona, then, Women's Studies was developed within Ethnic Studies. As the course offerings changed and as the curriculum evolved, the goal of the department began to focus on the integration of race and class into the new Women's Studies courses and the integration of gender and class into the existing Ethnic Studies courses. And, some new classes such as "Racism and Sexism" were created. The name of the department was changed to Ethnic and Women's Studies in 1981, and the first year of the new combined department was spent designing a curriculum which included five minors in the following areas: Afroamerican Studies, Asian/Pacific American Studies, Chicano/Hispanic Studies, American Indian Studies, and Women's Studies. Once the program was in place, the next academic year was spent publicizing the minors.

Moses was promoted to serve as Dean of the College of Arts. Richard Santillan, a Hispanic political scientist who had been teaching in the department for several years, was made chair. A full-time, ex-officio position of Women's Studies Coordinator was created and Lillian Jones, a white female historian who had been teaching in the department on a part-time basis, was selected to fill it. The following year, at the

invitation of the tenured faculty, Jones became chair and serves in that capacity today.

Currently, the department has five tenure-track positions and each academic year an additional four to six part-time faculty are hired to teach on an ongoing basis. Because of changes in faculty teaching service areas and faculty moves to administrative positions, the department finds itself offering the majority of its courses taught not by the original tenured faculty but by non-tenured faculty who work on a yearly or quarter-to-quarter basis. This is not a wholly unique phenomena in contemporary university circles but one that gives rise, as one might suspect, to both positive and negative results. On the one hand, the department's current needs in an ever-evolving program can be, and are, well served by the selection of faculty who share the current agenda of the department (race/class/gender), who understand the tasks in implementing that agenda, and who are willing to contribute intellectually to it. The burden of old conflicts and old animosities, both personal and intellectual, are not brought to bear on the present and future by the newer and often temporary faculty. There is, however, a generic understanding of the history of the department born out of communal experiences in Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies everywhere and at Cal Poly. I don't want to imply that the tenured faculty do not also support the race/class/gender agenda. Several, in fact, not only support it but provide real leadership in this area for the department and the university. But there are, obviously, real problems with (a) the prevalence of part-time faculty and non-tenure track faculty teaching so many of the class offerings, not least a lack of sense of security for the faculty and a lack of stability in staffing the program and, (b) the feeling on the part of some senior faculty that the department has changed in ways in which they are not prepared to go.

There are larger issues, however, than those of staffing. Ultimately, the largest pedagogical issue confronting the department is how to take leadership in educating students to live in both a complex, polyethnic immediate community (California, Southern California, and Los Angeles and Orange counties) as well as the complex, cross-cultural context of the global setting. Students in our classes are from all ethnic groups, both genders, and primarily middle-class (as they define themselves). They are also primarily suburban. Like most other Americans, they are not particularly sophisticated about people who reside outside the United States, nor are they sophisticated about people who live in communities other than their own. Most of our white students see their own Euro-American culture as a generic one, most of our male students see their experiences as the human one, and many of our ethnic students of color are atuned to both their own communities and the Euro-American one but not to other peoples of color. Many of our students are very young and have difficulty getting outside themselves and their personal history. Previous education has not taught them to analyze in terms of

race/class/gender. Furthermore, what we do in our department is perceived not only as intellectual, but also as political (as is the rest of the university but not acknowledged as such). What we teach is equally often perceived as controversial and disturbing. Frequently we tell students that education, if done correctly, is difficult and painful, and indeed, might be revolutionary. To accomplish this within the structure of one of the most conservative institutions in American society, the university, is obviously challenging for faculty and students.

Curriculum development and teaching are only a part of our responsibility. While race/class/gender is the primary agenda of the Ethnic and Women's Studies Department, we understand the need to encourage all academic departments to attend to these issues, in their curriculum, in their student recruitment and retention activities, and in their faculty hiring. To that end, the small number of faculty in the department participate in numerous university-wide committees, do guest lectures, conduct workshops and seminars, politick continually, serve on fact-finding groups, and attempt to maintain ties to student organizations. We ask a great deal of our faculty and we can offer little in terms of reward. And, as in any group, there are always those few on whom the burden falls more heavily.

Several of our classes are on the university's General Education list. By taking one of our lower division courses, for instance, a student can fulfill the requirement in Social Sciences. Many students come to us for this reason. We find, however, that a good number of students who took their first class in Ethnic and Women's Studies as a way to fulfill a G.E. requirement, return for at least one follow-up class at the lower or upper division level. Oftentimes, in the written comments section of student evaluations (which we require in each class each quarter), students will write that never have they before in their education been exposed to such material or been asked to think about such issues. Frequently they will comment, "This class should be required for all students." We agree. Although new policies at our university require all classes in G.E. to now have a "cross-cultural" and/or "cross-disciplinary" approach, the requirement of having completed an Ethnic and Women's Studies class before graduation is still not in the immediate future.

The challenges of faculty staffing, curriculum development, and university politics are only part of the appointed task, however. We are, after all, a part of the university and as such are involved in the intellectual process of debate on the theoretical and philosophical issues raised in the focus on race/class/gender. Ethnic and Women's Studies (by definition) is a statement of challenge to not only the traditional academy but to Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies. It promises a new contribution and a different vision. This is perhaps our most difficult task at Cal Poly—because it requires time and energy not often allotted to state university faculty at a teaching institution, because it requires intellectual support not easily found in a small, isolated department, and

because it requires interchange and dialogue with others engaged in the same or similar tasks, organizationally almost unavailable in academia.

Academic disciplines are or should be continuously evolving. What we thought and taught two years ago is not necessarily what we should be thinking and teaching now. Both Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies are product and process. The product, in part, is education—of our students, of the university community, of ourselves. The process is simultaneously exciting and tiring, solitary and communal, challenging yet often defeating. Creating tools for analyses that incorporate the dynamics of race/class/gender, learning to think polyrythmically, helping students and colleagues accept complexity holistically, peeling away the layers of intellectual stricture are all part of the process we hope we are engaged in. This process, if undertaken carefully, guarantees no finished product.

Many of the old challenges remain—to be or not to be (or how much to be) enveloped in the cloak of university responsibility and sanction; to balance being marginal (in the best sense that that implies) and yet institutionalized (also in the best sense); to be intellectually provocative (and even often antagonistic) and yet be accessible and cooperative.

Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies are not fads. Their tenure in the university should not and does not depend strictly on political climate outside the university. Both “disciplines” offer content, methods, and analysis that enhance the educational process of the university and the society at large. Empowering individual students with knowledge, history, and the ability to ask the right questions can operate arm in arm with institutional analysis and critique. Combining Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies into an Ethnic and Women's Studies approach strengthens each discipline, completes the framework within which lives and experiences are actually structured, allows for a more complete analysis of the past and present, and ultimately promises a more fruitful vision of the future.