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Feminist Anthropologist, Faculty Activist

COMMEMORATING THE WORK OF KAREN BRODKIN



ON MONDAY, October 20, students and scholars from various institutions gathered in Royce Hall to attend *Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*, a conference organized to honor the life and scholarship of retiring UCLA Professor Karen Brodtkin. Speakers from the UC system and beyond populated panels focused on identity and social justice, new approaches to labor, and directions in counter-hegemonic research in order to consider the lasting impact of the work of one of the academic community's foremost faculty activists and feminist anthropologists.

In the words of Sondra Hale, Professor of Anthropology and Women's Studies, "Karen

Karen has made invaluable contributions to studies of gender, race, class, Africa, colonialism, and counter-hegemonic movements. Her astute eye and always powerful analyses have influenced generations of students and peers alike. I know that her progressive voice will continue for some time to come. It was amazing at the symposium in her honor October 20th how many people, often coming from very diverse theoretical, regional, and topics backgrounds, have felt her impact. It was clear what a major impact she has made to the UCLA campus and far beyond.

– Sondra Hale

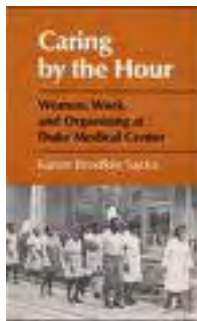
Karen was a really wonderful mentor. She was very supportive, but also pushed all of us to do rigorous work. Her ability to connect empirical observations with theory is amazing, and she communicated that very well in the graduate courses she taught.

– Cynthia Strathmann

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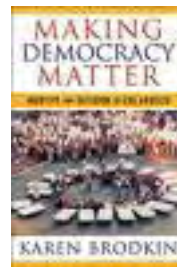
A longtime Professor in the Department of Anthropology, and a former Director of the Women’s Studies program (1987–1993), Professor Brodkin’s contributions to scholarship, activism, and intellectual life on the UCLA campus have been substantial. Having penned five books and numerous influential articles, her prolific research in the field of Anthropology and Women’s Studies is notable for its interdisciplinary approach to the complexities of race, class, gender, and sexuality. “I’ve always been particularly impressed by her ability to use material from multiple disciplines to speak to a particular issue,” says Cynthia Strathmann, a former student and current Research Assistant Professor of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at USC.

Brodkin’s first book, *Sisters And Wives: The Past and Future of Sexual Equality* (Greenwood, 1979), employs Marxist and feminist theoretical frameworks to explore the interconnected-



ness of kinship and economic institutions. Her second book, *Caring by the Hour: Women, Work And Organizing At Duke Medical Center* (University of Illinois Press, 1988), combines written and oral history, medical sociology, feminist theory, and ethnography in a study of

the work experiences of black and white women who comprised a labor union at Duke Medical Center. *Caring by the Hour* was awarded the Conrad Arensberg Award from the Society for the Anthropology of Work. Though these earlier works firmly established Brodkin as a pioneering feminist anthropologist, she has continued publishing book-length studies throughout her career. One of her recent projects, *Making Democracy Matter: Identity and Activism in Los Angeles* (Rutgers University Press, 2007), chronicles the reach and scope of grassroots immigrant and labor rights projects in present day Los Angeles. The book, in its focus on the organizers of social movements and the kinds of political subjectivities their work makes possible, offers a theoretical approach to the idea that ordinary people can have an impact on, and make a change in, the world around them. In a review of the book, Dana Frank, University of Cali-



fornia, Santa Cruz noted, “During the 1990s an amazing new generation of young activists, mostly women, immigrants, and people of color, transformed the Los Angeles labor movement, bringing a new vision of democracy to organizations not always ready for change. Now Karen Brodkin gives us their story in this wonderfully inspiring book, bursting with wisdom, dedication, imagination, and, best of all, models for how the labor movement can become a dynamic and embracing social movement seeking justice for all.”

Professor Brodkin’s own impact has been felt not only in her published work but also in UCLA classrooms. She has taught both graduate and undergraduate courses, both in the Department of Anthropology and the Women’s Studies program. She is remembered by her former students as an exemplary faculty member who demonstrated a sincere dedication to a younger generation of scholars. Cynthia Strathmann notes, “Karen was a really wonderful mentor. She was very supportive, but also pushed all of us to do rigorous work. Her ability to connect empirical observations with theory is amazing, and she communicated that very well in the graduate courses she taught.” In a recent interview with *UCLA Today* (October 10, 2008), Brodkin graciously commented on her relationship to her students: “I’ve been very privileged to have worked with so many superb grad students, and to have helped many of them create ways to combine their commitment to activism with their love of scholarship.”