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Title

150 Years of Women in the English Department

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/82f9b59w>

Author

Gallagher, Catherine

Publication Date

2023-12-18

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Compiled by Catherine Gallagher

150 Years of Women at Berkeley



2020 marked the 150th anniversary of the Regents' Resolution that "young ladies be admitted into the University on equal terms in all respects with young men." The resolution was passed just one year after the first term had begun at UC, and several young women had already enrolled in courses. Nevertheless, the Regents' resolution was significant as the first official statement that UC was a coeducational university, where male and female students were equally welcome.

The Berkeley English Department had a sizable number of women undergraduate majors in every generation, but it seems to have been far less hospitable to women faculty for most of its history. It was not until 1947, almost eighty years after the university's founding, that the English Department tenured a woman faculty member, and it was another seventeen years before a second woman was tenured. The last time a history of the Berkeley English Department was written, in 1968 for the centenary of the passage of the California law that established the university, there were forty-five tenured men in English and one woman, so it isn't surprising that women are almost entirely absent from the official historical record. Fifty years later, in 2018, women were fifty percent of the English faculty, but the history of that fifty-year transformation has not yet been written.

In 2020 there was a campus-wide effort to begin retrieving the missing histories of women at UCB, and the essays, profiles, and interviews collected here are the English Department's contribution to that project. They feature individual English-Department alumnae as well as both past and present faculty members. Many were written by undergraduate researchers, and some reflections on the people described were contributed by alumnae and faculty. The English Department has been the home of some of the university's most historically important women: in 1905, the first female faculty member in the entire university—Lucy Sprague—was appointed (although never tenured) in English; in 2017, English Department Professor Carol Christ was appointed the first female UCB Chancellor. Many of our alumnae and faculty are nationally-acclaimed scholars and writers. These pieces will acquaint you with some of their careers at Berkeley and beyond. Also included are fascinating but forgotten figures, whose experiences shed light on the deeper history of the department. And, to glimpse the transition between the first hundred years, when women were mainly

absent from the faculty, and the last fifty, when their hiring became common, we've included profiles of ten women who arrived in the transitional period, from the late sixties through the early eighties.

The texts are arranged in chronological order, according to their subjects' arrivals at Berkeley.

1. Essay on Lucy Sprague
2. Essay on Ella Young, followed by a reflection on Young by Catherine Flynn
3. Essay on Josephine Miles, followed by a reflection by Lyn Hejinian
4. Essay on Joan Didion
5. Essay on Maxine Hong Kingston
6. Essay on Dorothee Finkelstein, followed by a remembrance of by Kim Chernin
7. Profiles of the Transition Team: Anne Middleton, Janet Adelman, Carol Christ, Carolyn Porter, Ann Banfield, Julia Bader, Frances Ferguson, Catherine Gallagher, Elizabeth Abel, Susan Schweik
8. Interview with Lyn Hejinian
9. Interview with Namwali Serpell

Lucy Sprague: First Woman on the Berkeley Faculty (1906-1912)

By Amanda Styles



Among the many female faculty members of the English department throughout its history, Lucy Sprague Mitchell stands out as the one who never focused her studies in English. She majored in philosophy during her undergraduate education at Radcliffe (the female “annex” to Harvard). Sprague’s six years in the Berkeley English Department as an Assistant Professor came about not because she was an academic with a strong background in literary studies but because the president of the university thought she would make a good Dean of Women. In 1903, when Sprague was still living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, President Benjamin Ide Wheeler, who had recently met her, asked if she would be interested in a position working with the women students at Berkeley. Sprague accepted on the condition that she be given a teaching position in order to hold an appropriate rank, and Wheeler assented. The question of what subject she would teach came later. In her first three years at Berkeley, Sprague served a trial period in which she took graduate classes, assisted in teaching courses, and figured out what the needs and duties of a Dean of Women might be. She began the fall of 1903 as a reader in the Department of Economics before working in 1904 as a reader in the English Department. From there she became an Instructor and finally, in 1906, an Assistant Professor of English.

It is not, though, simply by accident that the English Department can claim ownership of the first female faculty appointment at Berkeley. Her departmental assignment was not quite as random as it might at first appear. Sprague’s faculty status was important because it granted her the power to enhance the lives of the female student body, and it set a precedent for her successors. And being associated with literature, especially poetry, also turned out to be a practical advantage to her deanship.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, departmental disciplines were often not very rigidly defined, and as a product of the Harvard philosophy faculty, Sprague’s college education had been remarkably wide-ranging, even including quite a bit of British literature. George Herbert Palmer, the Harvard philosophy professor who was most important to her education (during her college years and in those immediately following), was especially interested in literature. He had trained in classics and had done a famous translation of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Sprague lived in his home while a student, was an intimate friend of his wife, and even served as an unofficial research assistant for his scholarly work on the seventeenth-century poet George Herbert, so she had experience in literary scholarship even though she’d been a philosophy major. In her memoir, Sprague

writes, “I took several courses in English Literature at Radcliff, but my real education came through Mr. Palmer’s readings” (124). Each evening George Palmer read poetry to Lucy and his wife, Alice Freeman Palmer, who had been both the President of Wellesley College and the Dean of Women at the University of Chicago. Even after Alice Palmer’s death, Sprague continued for a time to live in their house and serve as assistant to George Palmer, so she was immersed in literary culture and scholarship.

Sprague’s academic interests, like those of both Palmers, were not limited to a single subject, and she later came to hold the belief that without breadth one could not be a good teacher. She later became an influential educational theorist, stressing the education of both the “whole child” and the “whole teacher”. A remark George Palmer once made about himself would resonate throughout Sprague’s career: “I do not teach Greek. I teach boys. Greek is what I start with.” Sprague might have described her own teaching at Berkeley in a similar way: she aspired to teach young women, and poetry was where she started. Mere subject matter, in other words, was of secondary importance, and narrow specialization destroyed creativity.

Since Sprague had no predecessor when she became Berkeley’s Dean of Women, she was free to define the position as she saw fit. Many of her male colleagues thought the women students were a distraction to the men, and they had wanted the matronly presence of a Warden of Women. They were disappointed when Sprague, an unmarried twenty-five-year-old, was appointed. In contrast to the forbidding authority figure some desired, Sprague cultivated a public image as a wise but compassionate and trustworthy mentor and advisor. She tried to create what she referred to as a “Heart Culture” (an idea taken from her mentor Alice Palmer) within the female student body, aiming for affectionate bonds among the students that would inspire achievement and raise their morale.

Sprague detected the lack of a female community at Berkeley, and to create a sense of friendly camaraderie among the students she began hosting frequent receptions at her home; there were refreshments and, importantly, poetry readings. George Palmer’s nightly readings served as a model, and her practice of simply reading poetry to the students may have inspired her later theoretical ideas about the poetic qualities of language generally, its rhythms, sounds, and movement, which make it central to all other learning. In her faculty capacity, she did teach some freshman seminars, similar to the modern-day equivalent of R1A&B, and later classes on versification and poetry for female students. Some of that training paid off when she suggested that the women students as a whole could raise their stature on campus by creating a massive poetic pageant. The students enthusiastically brought the idea to reality in *The Parthenia*, which paid tribute to various important female figures in history. It was entirely designed, constructed, and performed by hundreds of women students, and it was completely written in verse by one of them.

Sprague's literary ventures were only parts of her greater mission, which was to expand the cultural, intellectual, and vocational horizons of the women. Upon entering her position, Sprague noticed that 90% of her students were preparing for careers in teaching, even though many of them did not possess much interest in the occupation. They simply thought there were no alternatives. Consequently, she sought to prove this conception incorrect, taking many of her students to various establishments in Oakland and San Francisco where women were engaged in social work, medicine, and other vocations.

Perhaps the most unusual evidence of Lucy Sprague's holistic care for the women students was her course on sex education. With the 2,000 women and 5,000 men on campus, sexual health was an essential topic of discussion. With the help of Dr. Elanor Bancroft, the women's physician for the university, she taught a course on women's reproductive health and hygienics. By today's standards the course was quite basic, focusing on the stages of pregnancy as well as precautions against sexually transmitted diseases, but for the time it was revolutionary. In her memoir Sprague stated, "Of all the queer things I was called upon to become at Berkeley at the age of twenty-seven, I think becoming a specialist on sex diseases was the queerest" (Sprague Mitchell, 200). Obviously, she would rather have been teaching poetry.

After a total of nine years of living in Berkeley, and six working as the Dean of Women, Sprague decided to leave the University of California to live in New York with her new husband, Wesley Clair Mitchell (1912). There she opened Bank Street College in 1913 (later referred to as the Bureau of Educational Experiments), a school that worked on developing an experimental curriculum that could later be adapted by broader education circles. At Bank Street, she built on what she'd learned Berkeley. As in her time here, she strove to create a system of interactive learning as well as a culture of connection with colleagues and students. She pioneered the idea of "teaching the whole child" and extended it to "teaching the whole teacher," when her curriculum expanded to prepare educators. Sprague Mitchell strongly believed in the power of children's observational skills as well as their ability to make connections by reflecting on their own experiences. For these reasons, she continued to focus on the poetry of language and the need to explore one's own surroundings.

Despite being a short chapter of Sprague Mitchell's life, her Berkeley years left a deep imprint on her future research and writing. Of course, Berkeley was where she met her husband "Robin" Mitchell, but it was also the place where she first experimented with educational practices and concepts, and discovered a problem that affected the whole education system: lack of other career opportunities for women sent many into teaching jobs they didn't really want. Sprague Mitchell's faculty appointment in the English Department also allowed her to teach the poetry she loved, and it may have started her investigations into the poetic, experiential, aspects of all language learning.

Supplementary Reading Material

For further information on the life and career of Lucy Sprague Mitchell at UC Berkeley and beyond, consider reading her 1953 autobiography and husband's biography: *Two Lives; the Story of Wesley Clair Mitchell and Myself*. Brandeis University Professor Joyce Antler has also composed a thorough account of Mitchell's life and research in her 1987 biography: *Lucy Sprague Mitchell: The Making of a Modern Woman*.

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Forgotten Chapters of Department History: #1 Ella Young's Lectureship

By Kamila Kaminska-Palarczyk



Photo credit: Ansel Adams

The first woman to hold an endowed lectureship in the English Department was a celebrity. She entered the department through the Celtic Studies program, the first degree-granting program of its kind in the country, created in 1911. Two decades later the program appointed Irish writer Ella Young as the Phelan Memorial Lecturer in Celtic Mythology and Literature.

Young had graduated with a Master's Degree from the Royal College of Dublin, Ireland, where she studied political science and law; however, she quickly became invested in literary pursuits. Although today she is better known for her authorship of children's literature and poetry, as well as her early championing of environment preservation, her ardent cultivation of an "authentic" Irishness was the trait that stood out for her contemporaries. Especially inspired by her witness of and participation in the 1916 Uprising (during which she is alleged to have hidden ammunition in the floorboards of her home for the Irish Republican Army), Young thought it essential that the revitalization of Irish culture be nourished through Celtic mythological roots. And she insisted that those myths expressed a more direct and intimate connection to the natural world than the cultures of modern industrial societies offer.

Her political activism and passion for Celtic lore, though, caused problems for her entry into the United States even as they made her an instant celebrity. When an especially intrusive immigration officer discovered her literal belief in fairies, Young's mental fitness to enter the country became questionable; it was suspected that she might become a "public charge." While Young was thus detained at Ellis Island, newspaper headlines published dramatic runners, including "Irish Poetess and Uncle Sam to Fight It Out." Despite the charge that she was mentally unstable and therefore posed a threat, "librarians and writers over the country appealed to the State Department" ("US Delays Entry for Irish Poetess") on her behalf, and argued that the University of California needed her intellectual labor. It was under these conditions that Young took up her endowed lectureship at Berkeley and began creating her legacy as an eccentrically captivating teacher.

Dorothea McDowell's biography, *Ella Young and Her World*, describes Young as "living two lives, the first 60 years in Ireland and the final 30 in California." She theorizes that Young, once at Berkeley, attempted to reconcile her physical distance from Ireland through the creation of an ultra-Irish persona, which was especially dependent on costume and public performance. Her public lectures proved memorable not only for what she said but also for how she presented herself: she wore what she thought of as the

traditional Celtic robes of a Druid bard, which she called her “reciting robes,” to visually portray an authentic Irish identity. While lecturing from her new home on the Pacific Coast, enrobed in typically dark purple, Young was determined not to regress into “dead knowledge.” To avoid the threat of monotony, she never wrote her lectures down, explaining, “They are born between myself and the audience” (McDowell, 585). In Wheeler Hall, Young delivered public lectures on topics that ranged from “Halloween Among the Celts” to “Dublin Wit” and “The Art of Storytelling and Craftsmanship in Poetry.” These lectures’ titles are intriguing, yet audience members (including mathematician Derrick Lehmer) more vividly recalled her presentations on the faery world: “Whether one listener, a roomful, or a crowded hall, she held all spellbound” (McDowell, 586). Part of her appeal was her insistence that the supernatural world portrayed in Celtic folklore and literature could bring her listeners into a closer relationship with the natural world around them.

Young was admired at Berkeley, and in turn she admired the town, especially its exotic flora, breathtaking views, and youthful exuberance: “Berkeley is a town that one should see in the springtime,” she wrote in her memoir. “Street after street has been planted with the Japanese plum tree, with the Japanese cherry, with almond trees and the japonica which is called fire-bush. Its hills are very green. Cloud shadows lie on the bay. And the town itself is full of young people: girls and boys; orange-coloured sweaters, rose-red skirts, shoes that tap gently on the pavement” (McDowell, 585).

Outside of the university, and most likely after her retirement, Young named herself “Airmid,” after the ancient Irish Celtic Goddess of healing. But her devotion to the Celtic revival extended beyond her fabricated persona; it was also deeply embedded in her writings. A majority of her works, both during her time in Ireland and after her immigration to California, were adaptations of Celtic lore. Her extensive list of poetic works and children’s stories includes *Celtic Wonder Tales* (1910), *The Wonder-Smith and His Son* (1927), and *The Unicorn with Silver Shoes* (1932). Young’s *The Tangle-Coated Horse* (1929) even received a Newbery Honor, recognizing the story’s “significant contribution to American children’s literature.” When scholars and editors—including John Matthews and Denise Sallee—began to compile a collection of Young’s works, they observed that the diegetic worlds of her literature accepted “the presence of such beings as ogres, magicians, and strange beasts ... [as] a perfectly natural state of affairs” (Matthews and Sallee, 17). Young’s success in reconciling generations of tradition through her literature of the magical realm is especially resonant when “she puts contemporary language into the mouths of strange beasts alongside the ‘high speech’ of epic” (Matthews and Sallee, 17).

Although the surface of Young’s prose creates a magical realm for children, librarian and lecturer on children’s literature Frances Clarke Sayers argues that “to read the books of Ella Young ... is to move in a world of epic proportion, heroic deed, and heroic character” (Matthews and Sallee, 8). In an interview, Young explained her

fascination with the thin veil between the natural and fantastical realms: “It’s fairy lore that makes the world beautiful ... there are fairies all about us, if we’ll only look for them. How sad it is that a materialistic world laughs at them and their beauty ... The fairy kingdom is a vast realm of magic where most anything can happen” (Matthews and Sallee, 9). When questioned about the intended audience of her children’s literature, Young simply responded, “Since people always like what is not intended for them, perhaps a few grown-ups will read it also” (Matthews and Sallee, 17). Young’s remark suggests that any person can connect to the fantastical in literature and think beyond the purely materialistic gratifications of the commercial world when inspired by nature and ancient myths. She advocated “the natural world and our relationship to it” as an alternative to consumerism and was quoted in the *LA Times* (1926) as “deploring the practice of supplying quantities of toys to American children ... [because] it inhibits the development of the imagination.”

Her unconventional ideas, however, were also subject to critical scrutiny. Young’s work was frequently denigrated through American conceptions of the Irish Renaissance. American literary critics often portrayed her male counterparts as the truly creative elements in the Irish Literary revival, casting the women as mere popularizers: “Only a Yeats could turn this material into great poetry, but the women gathered it into books, so that everyone could read the ancient lore and be warmed and heartened by it” (Scurge). Skeptical attitudes toward Irish sovereignty and assumptions of the country’s general inferiority also clouded Young’s reception: “Ireland’s closest present-day link with the fairies, is coming to America. Not, perhaps, one of the major lights in the Irish literary Renaissance, [Young] is nevertheless an important figure, breathing ... interior Gaelic life” (Jewell). An especially unforgiving American critic, Thomas Scurge, argued that “the weaknesses of [Young’s] method [reflected] in a way the weakness of the Irish literary movement as a whole.” This was the same critic who believed that the “Irish Renaissance [was only] the brief and brilliant sunset of European romanticism” (Scurge).

Thus despite Young’s scholarly success in Gaelic translation and adaptation, she still confronted an intersection of oppressions as a woman within the academic and literary worlds. Cast as merely a minor figure in the Irish literary scene because of her desire to restore Celtic beliefs and link them to the preservation of nature, Young was positioned as an impractical eccentric who “spread so romantic a background for the modern Irish State,” which was only “slowly establishing itself as a political unit” (Jewell).

Young, however, actively challenged this narrative from her new home in California in several ways. In addition to making herself the American ambassador for literary Ireland through her public lectures, she also cultivated the local California creative establishment. She was a frequent guest at the home of the prolific and influential poet Robinson Jeffers, who was also influenced by the Celtic revival. Jeffers and Young joined forces in comparing what they saw as the physical and spiritual

similarities between California's central coast (especially Big Sur) and Ireland's western coastal regions. Young was also a close friend of Virginia and Ansel Adams, the renowned photographer of California's wilderness, who made Yosemite Valley a symbol of the state. Ansel Adams took several portraits of Young in her "reciting robes". Circulating in the networks of recognized California artists and conservationists, Young was no longer just a minor remnant of the Irish Celtic revival; she became a unique hybrid Irish-Californian and decided to spend the rest of her life on the Central Coast.

Young thus created a new land of mythic enchantment in California, and she eventually seems to have decided that it was superior to the one she left behind. Drawing on Young's 1945 autobiography, entitled *Flowering Dusk: Things Remembered Accurately and Inaccurately*, historian Kevin Starr sums up her mature view, "There were sea spirits at Point Lobos, she claimed, and fairies, although not as many fairies as there were in Ireland—yet stronger fairies, stronger spirits on Point Lobos and the Big Sur to the south than in Ireland" (Starr 325). In a gesture indicative of both her lifelong devotion to natural preservation and her dual Irish-Californian identity, Young left the copyright for *Celtic Wonder Tales and Other Stories* to the "Save the Redwoods League" (McDowell 545).

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Reflections on Ella Young and the History of Irish Studies

By Professor Catherine Flynn

Ella Young was a complex character and central to the building up of Celtic Studies at Berkeley. During her ten years as James D. Phelan Lecturer in Irish Myth and Lore, she gave lectures at Columbia, Smith, Vassar and Mills. As a woman holding a prestigious lectureship, she was exceptional for her time. However, she emerged at a moment in Ireland in which women were at the forefront of political and cultural movements. Young was involved in the Easter Rising of 1916, like the better-known Constance Gore (Countess Markievicz) and Eva Gore Booth, sisters who had previously been active in the anti-war and suffrage movements. Coming to the United States in 1922, Young was an ambassador for the new Irish Free State, following Ireland's successful War of Independence against British rule.

Much of Young's iconography and mythical references come from this context: her writing is part of the Irish cultural nationalist movement which attempted to revive folkloric and mythological material to create a new national literature and repertoire of images to inspire and motivate the Irish republican movement. The mythic past of gods, druids, and supernaturally gifted warriors was a powerful response to colonial accounts of Irish degeneracy. Young's dealings with these materials however also expressed her engagement with larger international movements. As a young woman she was an early member of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, a version of the Theosophical Society which was established in 1875 by the Russian émigré Helena Blavatsky in New York. Theosophy attempted to weld not just different mythic traditions and religions together but also to forge out of philosophy, religion and science a new syncretic psychological religion that would offer an experiential and intellectual synthesis made almost impossible in a world profoundly altered by secularization, positivism, and technology.

While the Hermetic Society of Dublin focused more on the magical rites of Cabala and Rosicrucianism than on the Buddhist and Hinduist philosophies favored by Theosophy, the central "objects" of Blavatsky's movement can be discerned in Young's writings, works which can otherwise seem whimsical. Take for example the short piece "The Sunflower" (1900) in which Young feels the flowers communicating forcefully with her. Their insistent presences form a portal to the sun's power and recall to her the Irish mythic figures of Lugh and Angus Óg, gods of the sun and of poetry, whom she in turn likens to Apollo. Such musings seem fanciful but they embody a commitment to a hidden unity, a single being in which matter and mind, physical beings and gods merge. The animistic beliefs Young displays in various accounts we have of her—her insistence on talking to trees, her celebration of her cat's nobility—are instances of a theosophical interest in powers unexplained or dismissed by empirical science.

Like W. B. Yeats, who had also been a member of the Hermetic Society, Young cultivated the persona of a poetic visionary. While Yeats gradually put aside this role, Young continued to deploy it and to work in a stylized Celtic idiom. She did so however to great effect. Fashioning herself as a druidess, Young drew together diverse audiences and inspired alternative communities such as the San Luis Obispo Dunites. We might learn from her today. The new Irish Studies Program at Berkeley is a complement to the Celtic Studies Program and committed to contemporary Irish and Irish American issues among which international alliances and environmental concerns rank highly. Young is inspiring in her ability to whet curiosity and to activate a new consciousness with the goal of a reimagined community.

Josephine Miles: Poet and First Tenured Professor in English

By Emma Campbell, Kahyun Koh, and Anya Vertanessian



Born in Chicago on June 11th, 1911, Josephine Miles was an acclaimed poet, professor, literary critic, and a vital part of the Berkeley community. In 1947, she became the first woman to be awarded tenure in the English Department, eighty years after its founding, and she was the sole tenured woman for another fifteen years. Although English had always been a popular major for women students, the department was reluctant to appoint women to its regular faculty. Miles' achievement is all the more noteworthy because her sex was not the only condition in her life that might have been expected to limit her horizons; she suffered from chronic arthritis, which left her physically disabled since childhood. But instead of giving up her ambitions, she became an

example of courageous change on several fronts: not only the first woman to be tenured in the English Department but also one of the first significantly disabled members of the faculty, and one of the first to combine the roles of poet and critic in her academic career.

Miles' family moved to Southern California when she was only five years old. The move was mainly due to her rapidly developing arthritis; the Los Angeles climate, her parents had hoped, would help alleviate her condition (Livingston, 295). Despite its worsening, Miles began her academic training at UCLA, where she graduated with a degree in English, and then came to Berkeley in 1932 to pursue her doctorate, completing that degree in 1938. Miles' dissertation on Wordsworth's poetry was later turned into a book, *Wordsworth and the Vocabulary of Emotion*, and published in 1942. She joined Berkeley's English department as an Assistant Professor in 1940 and was tenured seven years later.

By that time, Miles had published not only her dissertation and two other books of literary scholarship but also three collections of poetry, *Lines of Intersection* (1939) *Poems on Several Occasions* (1941), and *Local Measures* (1946). She was thus the author of six books when she was promoted, and her pace of publication did not let up afterwards. She produced more than a dozen books of poetry, all of which were praised for their unique voice and precise diction. At the end of her career, they were assembled

into her *Collected Poems: 1930-1983*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry (Poetry Foundation). Miles was just as prolific a writer of scholarly and critical studies, publishing over ten books in which she closely studied poetic diction in various periods of British literature. She is now considered a pioneer of the use of computer technology in literary analysis (Calisphere: University of California). In the 1970s, her scholarly distinction was recognized by two important honors: she was chosen to give the Faculty Research Lecture, and the statewide University of California administration gave her the rarely awarded title of University Professor, which she held until retiring in 1978 (Wikipedia).

In that year, Miles was also given the Distinguished Teaching Award for her thirty-eight years of teaching. She was well-known among English Department students for her engaging teaching methods, which both sparked creativity and pushed students to think critically. Whatever their backgrounds or levels of preparation, Miles paid rare personalized attention to all of the students and showed a genuine interest in their progress (Livingston, 308-312). A former student remembers Miles as a caring mentor and interlocutor: “She tells stories, reminisces and theorizes, but unlike many people who talk for the pure pleasure of it, she never loses track of the person she’s talking to, and she listens with absolute attention and a quick understanding” (Oral History Center, 287). True to her interactive teaching style, Miles would begin poetry seminars by asking students to write verses in the metrical rhythms of their own names (Calisphere: University of California). She formed lasting friendships with many of her students, and during the years of her retirement, her Virginia Street house was “frequented by poets, students, and former students from all over the country” (Calisphere).

Miles bore a “quietly incendiary mind,” according to J.R. Caldwell (Poetry Foundation). Her undying optimism and resistance against limiting the activities of disabled women in particular were widely noticed. Professor Susan Schweik, arriving in the English Department after Miles’ retirement but while she was still an active member of the community, was partly inspired by her relation to Miles when she became interested in Disability Studies and later went on to help establish the minor program devoted to that topic at Berkeley. Schweik’s articles on Miles address the intersection of sexism and ableism in her career, recounting, for example, that a member of the faculty at an Ivy League institution, upon considering Miles for a faculty position, lamented that her femaleness disqualified her: “If only Josephine Miles was a man our problem would be solved” (Schweik, 2007, 50). And yet the fact that Miles suffered from sexism did not always insure the sympathy of other women; Schweik reports that some women perceived Miles’ disabled body as asexual and thereby disqualified from the category of “woman.” When teaching Miles’ poetry in a graduate course at Berkeley on modern women poets, Schweik was shocked to be told by a colleague that “Jo Miles was not a woman” (Schweik, 2011, 72).

The remark not only displays a callous attitude of exclusion by a nondisabled woman but also raises the thorny issue of tokenism that tends to come up in discussions

of women academic pioneers, who often spent most of their careers as the only women in otherwise all-male departments. Were these chosen few being used to ward off criticisms of systematic sexual discrimination? And in Miles' case, did her disability actually make it easier for men in the department to accept her as the exceptional woman? Miles herself was fully aware that these issues swirled around and might be said to have clouded her success. In an oral history interview done in 1982, she revealed that an unspecified Dean of Women once baldly told her "that I had put the cause of women in education at the University back fifty years because my presence did not raise the crucial issues of, you know, femininity and so forth" (Miles, 1983, 108). With typical generosity, Miles goes on to surmise that the Dean wanted faculty women with whom younger women could easily identify: "it turned out to be a true, though it hurt my feelings at the time, of course, that the role model issue is very important. I did not provide a role model, you see." Miles, to be sure, is exaggerating here; she must have known that many women students of the 1960s and 70s drew inspiration from her. When the interviewer presses for more explicit information, Miles replied, "The absence of threat to men was very important. Most of these women that were in this group were no threat to men for one reason or another" (Miles, 1983, 109).

Although Miles did not explicitly name the "one reason" that made her unthreatening, her poetry has a great deal to say about her life-long struggle with degenerative arthritis and society's response to it. In one essay, Susan Schweik argues that although Miles resisted others' attempts to define her by her disability, she wrote subtly but distinctly about denials of access and other disabling experiences. In the poem "Reason", for example, fragments of an antagonistic exchange over access to the sidewalk become a tensely economic narrative.

Said, Pull her up a bit will you, Mac, I want to unload there.
Said, Pull her up my rear end, first come first served.
Said, give her the gun, Bud, he needs a taste of his own bumper.
Then the usher came out and got into the act:

Said, Pull her up, pull her up a bit, we need this space, sir.
Said, For God's sake, is this still a free country or what?
You go back and take care of Gary Cooper's horse
And leave me handle my own car.

Saw them unloading the lame old lady,
Ducked out under the wheel and gave her an elbow.
Said, All you needed to do was just explain;
Reason, Reason is my middle name.

At once conversationally energetic and elegant, Miles' poetry is increasingly being recognized as foundational in the history of disability poetry and outstanding in its formal experimentation.

Miles died from pneumonia in 1985 at the age of 73. Her home on Virginia Street was bequeathed to the university as a creative center for writing seminars and as housing for visiting poets (McArdle). Decades have elapsed since her passing, yet her sharp, humorous, and resonant works stand as a monument to a life devoted to the university, especially to its English Department. Reflective of her unbridled spirit and fierce resilience, Miles' writing continues to teach and inspire readers.

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Professor Lyn Hejinian Explores Miles' Poem "On Inhabiting an Orange"

"On Inhabiting an Orange" is a relatively early poem by Josephine Miles. I think it appeared in her first book, *Lines at Intersection*, which came out in 1939. In *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (second edition), it is dated 1935, so it may have been published first in a literary magazine. It is not her greatest poem, but I have always admired its inventive prosody and its wit. Here's the poem:

On Inhabiting an Orange

All our roads go nowhere.
Maps are curled
To keep the pavement definitely
On the world.

All our footsteps, set to make
Metric advance,
Lapse into arcs in deference
To circumstance.

All our journeys nearing Space
Skirt it with care,
Shying at the distances
Present in air.

Blithely travel-stained and worn,
Erect and sure,
All our travelers go forth,
Making down the roads of Earth
Endless detour.

Skipping over the poem's title (itself a comedic gem), we find ourselves with a seventeen-line poem of four stanzas having what appears to be an over-all regular design, though we note that the last of the four stanzas has an "extra" line. All the lines are relatively short—the longest two lines contain six words, while four have only three and three have only two. It didn't take me long to type the poem into this document, and it doesn't take long to read it to oneself, either silently or out loud.

Before I typed the poem, I remarked that I've always admired Miles's "inventive prosody." It is inventive, of course, but an equally or perhaps even better characterization would be "irreverent." As the poem begins it immediately establishes a compelling meter, with three strong beats (or stresses) in the first line and two in the second. Each of those lines presents a single, grammatically simple statement. One can readily foresee the rhythmic pulse that will carry the poem forward. And one would be right, but how cleverly Miles plays with the rhythm, adding a few extra dance steps—three extra unstressed syllables—at the end of the third line! "To keep the pavement definitely": with those extra three syllables the reader prances onward to the stanza's last line, and there the poet brings her mischievousness to an end; we need, after all, to stay "On the world."

More soberly now, on better behavior, the reader continues on, bound to the rules of cartography and mathematics, of map projection and the geometry of spheres (or, in this case, of an orange, itself a playful metaphor for planet earth). The poem brings the reader to its end—the way isn't, really, all that difficult, and there are splendors along the way (the pairing of "in deference" and "To circumstance" is worth visiting just for its own sake). But by the last stanza, though blithe, the reader—or "the travelers"—are "travel-stained and worn." And the way doesn't come to an end quite as soon as expected—there's that extra line, one of the two longest, with an extra stress in it (four beats instead of two or three) to move through. And it doesn't bring the poet or the reader or the travelers to a destination but, instead, to "Endless detour."

When one remembers that Josephine Miles suffered from severe arthritis from childhood on and that walking was always extremely painful and almost impossibly difficult, the poem takes on extra intensity. It scrupulously avoids melodrama or self-pity, however—witness the impish "definitely" with which she defies her infirmity, allowing it no authority over her verse though it might limit her body. And nowhere does Miles reveal her disability. It may be common knowledge, but that was not of her doing.

My father was a student of Josephine Miles in the early 1930s (he graduated from Cal in the spring of 1936). He was one of the students who sometimes carried her from her office to her classroom or back to her office again. She was only five years older than he (Miles was born in 1911, my father in 1916). I wonder if he was half in love with her. If photos are to be believed, she was quite beautiful.

Joan Didion: A Unique Sensibility in a Time of Gender Conformity

By Julia Cunningham



Didion (right) with fellow Daily Cal editors in 1953

Joan Didion, a writer who first garnered great attention and praise for her literary essays about American subcultures of the 1960s, is one of many acclaimed authors to have started their careers at Berkeley. Sprinkled among fashion articles and makeup advertisements, much of Didion's early writing originally appeared on the pages of the "women's magazines" of her times. Her writing was unusually reflective and incisive, speaking to many women across the country who did not feel that the mass media took them seriously. In the late fifties and early sixties, women or minorities rarely had platforms to represent themselves complexly. As her popularity and acclaim increased throughout the '60s, Didion often found herself straddling the line between being an insider, writing for some of the most prominent women's magazines, and an outsider, writing about subject matter that was not frequently found among fashion and advice articles.

A trailblazer in undefined, or perhaps wrongly defined, territory, Didion likely became comfortable with this idea of self-definition and affirmation against a backdrop of ambiguity during her time at Berkeley. Reflecting on her time at Berkeley in a 1960 *Mademoiselle* article entitled "Berkeley's Giant: The University of California," she remarks on the immense resources and cleverness of both students and faculty at the university, but also their lack of clearly defined identity. She describes the university as "big, rich and, like its students, peculiarly undefined, oddly amoral." Her concluding thoughts in the article are telling: "Lost souls will not find themselves in those eucalyptus groves of academe. For Berkeley is a great place only for students capable of self-definition. It is a place of great riches, but it gives them up readily only to people of great expectations." Didion was one of these students capable of self-definition. She helped to usher in the popularity of literary nonfiction, becoming one of the most innovative and prolific writers to document and comment on cultural phenomena in the 1960s. Her work, eventually collected into best-selling collections, may first have appeared on the pages of magazines that were read mainly by women, but her audience was by no means limited to women. Her writings appeared at a time when women, whose professional roles had

declined throughout the late nineteen-forties and fifties, were just beginning to bolster and leverage their cultural power.

Didion's unique voice resonated with the times during which she obtained her education and entered the workforce. An undergraduate in the 1950s, Didion studied English at Berkeley from the spring of 1953 until 1956. She attended college during a time of immense change in both the United States and at Berkeley. Berkeley's enrollment was climbing rapidly in the post-WWII period. During the war, women had made up the majority of the student body, but after the boys came home and the federal government provided scholarships for returning veterans, women became a much smaller proportion of the students, sinking to lows not seen since the 1930s. Nevertheless, the campus was crowded: 11,000 undergraduates attending Didion's freshman year. Female students were outnumbered two to one by male students. The faculty at the university was growing and changing as well, but seemingly at a slower rate than the student population. While more female students were enrolling in institutions of higher education, faculty and professor positions were still dominated by men. At the time Didion attended Berkeley, there was a single female English professor, the great Josephine Miles.

In many ways, the campus was evolving in the fifties to become what Berkeley students know it as now; graduate students were increasing; there were more large lecture courses than earlier; and scientific research was taking off. However, there were also many aspects of student life that would be unrecognizable to students now. By the time Didion arrived on campus, university residence halls barely existed and could house only a few hundred students, not nearly enough to accommodate the majority of the campus population. Even fewer of these spots were available for women, as Stern Hall, which opened in 1942, was the only university sponsored residence option for women.

Given the limited options for housing, most students lived in boarding houses or, like Didion, joined Greek life. Didion became a Berkeley Tri-Delta upon arriving on campus, moving into the house soon after. However, Didion often remarked in her early writings that she did not share many of the same aspirations as her sisters, since many of them attended college in the hopes of finding a husband and retiring their academic or professional ambitions. This was not a sentiment Didion shared, and in addition to committing most of her extracurricular time to writing for and editing special editions of *The Daily Californian* and *The Occident*, she did not return to sorority life after her sophomore year.

These student publications, such as *The Daily Californian*, were some of the first instances in which Didion was able to demonstrate her writing and editorial prowess. In the spring of 1953, Didion co-edited, with longtime friend Peggy LaViolette, a special fashion issue of *The Daily Californian*. While optimistically subtitled "It's a Woman's World," the edition largely appeals to the narrowly defined understanding of what it means to be a woman that was prevalent in the '50s. Dominated by fashion and makeup supplements, the edition closes with an unattributed piece that serves as a contrast to much of the rest of the paper in tone. The article discusses the leadership role women

play at the university, particularly in the ASUC, where they took the lead on many student issues. The author discusses the tension between women having leadership roles at university and their more limited prospects after graduation. While Didion may not have written this article, this edition strikingly reflects the work that she would go on to do in her career. The more serious, inquisitive tone of this piece that causes readers to reflect on the unfair dichotomies imposed on women's lives, in contrast to the stereotypical portraits of women standing mutely next to the articles for sale in the advertisements, as if they were literally for sale themselves, is the kind of work that Didion would produce.

A self-described "poor student", Didion enjoyed, but always had ambitions beyond academia. Berkeley, while a place that informed many of her sensibilities as a writer, was not where she sought to remain after graduation. Having been chosen to be a guest editor at the women's lifestyle magazine, *Mademoiselle*, the summer of her junior year in 1955, Didion realized she wanted to be a part of the New York editorial world. These aspirations led her to apply to the Prix de Paris competition, a *Vogue* sponsored writing contest that awarded the winner a job in the magazine's New York or Paris office. Didion won the competition in 1956 and subsequently moved to New York after graduating from Berkeley to become a research assistant at *Vogue*. Thus it was that she vaulted directly from her Berkeley undergraduate life to that of a New York writer, making her name during the late '50s and early '60s primarily as a contributor to the popular but stylish women's magazines *Vogue* and *Mademoiselle*.

Foreshadowed by her work as a student at Berkeley, Didion's later career became a force for women in popular media. Her writing helped to legitimize the realm of "women's writing" by showing a distinct and nuanced perspective on the pages of popular magazines. Her ability to self-define amid the caricatured portraits of women and against a backdrop of doubt, which she likely learned at Berkeley, helped her develop a unique voice and a distinctively perceptive viewpoint. Her stylistic and intellectual strengths were singular, but they allowed Didion to pave the way for many other female journalists and writers.

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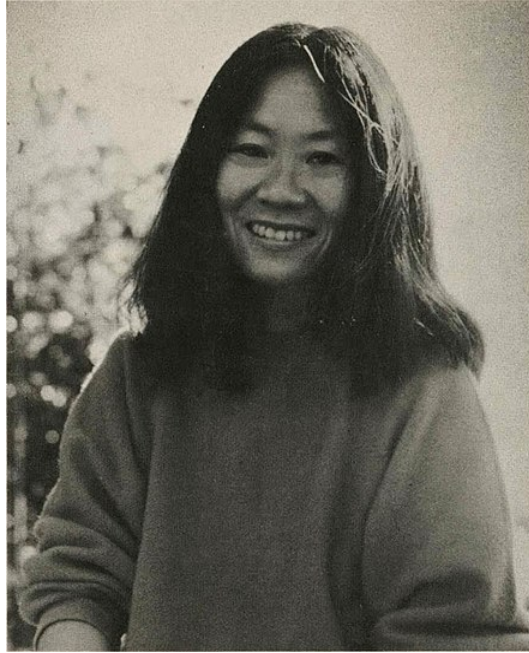
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Maxine Hong Kingston: The Spearhead of Asian American Studies and Literature

By Lucia Salazar



Maxine Hong Kingston, Wikiwand

Maxine Hong Kingston, the critically acclaimed author of *The Woman Warrior* (1976), *China Men* (1980), and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), graduated from UC Berkeley with an English degree in 1962 and returned as an English department faculty member in 1990. Her work has garnered a number of high-profile awards, including a Pulitzer Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Book Award, and the most prestigious prize awarded to artists by the U.S government, the National Medal of Arts. Kingston's work is acclaimed for both its literary merit and its foundational place in two related fields: Asian American literature and Asian American Studies. *The Woman Warrior* was the first commercially successful novel by an Asian American woman featuring a Chinese American woman protagonist.

Because Kingston was one of the first widely-read Asian American authors, her work was often imagined to depict “typical” experiences of the immigrant community. Before more authors diversified the field, *Woman Warrior* was included on course syllabi as a token of the entire culture. Thus, although the initial reception was enthusiastic, Kingston was dismayed by its often misguided, if not blatantly racist, reception. Just one example of this counterproductive acclaim is the *Peninsula Herald*'s review: “[*The Woman Warrior*] brings to mind ancient rituals, exotic teas, superstitions, silks, and fire-breathing dragons” (quoted in Kingston 1982). In 1982, Kingston admonished the critics who superimposed exotic stereotypes on her novel by noting that “they praised the wrong things”: “The critics who said the book was good because it was, or was not, like the oriental fantasy in their heads might as well have said how weak it was, since it in fact did not break through that fantasy” (Kingston 1982). Today the critical stereotyping by American book reviewers serves to remind us of just how new the phenomenon of the Asian American literary work was at the time. Reviewers to whom literature written by and about Asian Americans was unfamiliar tended to reach for the clichés closest at hand. And Kingston's push-back publicly identified her as an outspoken protector of Asian American literature against the pitfalls of exoticification.

A different sort of critique was also launched at the book from inside the Chinese American community, targeting departures from the historical Chinese story in *The*

Woman Warrior. The playwright Frank Chin, also a UC Berkeley English Department alum, is perhaps the most well-known, and most severe, critic of Kingston's work. He accused it of pandering to white Christian readers by altering traditional Chinese myths to make them more palatable to non-Chinese readers, thus boosting the book's popular appeal (Iwata 1990). In response, Kingston explained that she aimed to embody the historical oral tradition of Chinese folk tales, which naturally changes with each retelling: "From the very beginning, every time a story is being told, it changes in order to fit the circumstances and needs of people who hear it" (Zagni 2006). In her book *China Men*, Kingston tells and retells the story of her father's immigration from China four times, striving not so much for historical accuracy as for layers of possible meaning.

Nearly fifty years after *The Woman Warrior* was first published, Kingston's work has withstood the challenges from both outside and inside the Chinese American community to achieve canonical status in American and Asian American Literature courses. The longevity and breadth of her appeal are striking. "I think Maxine Hong Kingston won the debate [with the critics] through the sheer lasting power of her book," said Professor Colleen Lye of the Berkeley English Department. "People recognized the artfulness of the book. The more there was publishing on the subject," Lye continues, "the more it ceased to be the sole representative." And the more Kingston's literary experimentation and achievement are recognized, the less her works are expected to adhere to strict historical accuracy.

A large part of her accomplishment was her successful blending of the personal memoir genre with fiction. At the outset, publishers and scholars categorized Kingston's work as nonfiction, a designation that downplayed its literary nature. Kingston's publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, insisted on labeling *The Woman Warrior* as autobiography in order to make it more marketable to American audiences. While the book is certainly about Kingston and her mother, it bends the genre by narrating invented as well as remembered events, personal history and mythic adventures, character development through quotidian reality and through imaginatively inhabiting other existences, sometimes even supernatural ones. In a 2006 interview with the French Magazine *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, Kingston spoke about the pattern of mislabeling stories written by and about immigrants and minorities as nonfiction and the effect it has of ostracizing them from the realm of literature. The blend of genres, though, has also made Kingston's work a staple of both Asian American interdisciplinary studies and literature. She commented on the silver-lining of being mislabeled a writer of nonfiction: "My work is in anthropology classes, in sociology, history and ethnic studies classes, but it's also in literature classes... it seems that I have broken categories" (Zagne 2006).

Kingston has indeed "broken categories" in a number of ways, including by repositioning common tropes of Chinese Literature. Professor Lye points to the characters Kingston focuses on as an example of this subversion, "She was the first to write an ethnic autobiography in the Asian American tradition that centered on mothers

and daughters rather than fathers and daughters or fathers and sons, which were the main examples of Asian American autobiography in a fictionalized and non-fictionalized form.” Lye explains that Amy Tan later chose to write about the relationship between mother and daughter in her national bestseller *The Joy Luck Club*. This rejection of the patriarchal form and centralization of an immigrant woman as representative of the American woman was received as an intersectional feminist work.

Kingston is a trailblazing woman writer who has constantly had to cope with criticism, misreading, and the mislabeling of her work. The deciding factor in all of the controversies surrounding her work has been Kingston’s undeniable literary power and originality, which has stood the test of time. In *The Woman Warrior*, she draws a clear lineage between her mother’s “talk-story” (the oral relation of the stories of from China) and her own writing. She filled in the details of her mother’s stories imaginatively as a way of both realizing a collective identity and finding an individual one as a writer. English was not a popular major for Chinese Americans at the time. Indeed, Kingston came to Berkeley from Stockton with the intention of studying Engineering; but, as she later told an interviewer after winning the National Medal of Arts, “It felt like I was in prison.” She thirsted for imaginative freedom and found it in the English Department: “It was fun. All we did was read and talk about reading” (Knudsen 1997).

She has definitely taken inspiration from the school and the setting of the Bay Area; the novel *Tripmaster Monkey*’s protagonist is a graduate of UC Berkeley living in San Francisco during the psychedelic 60s. Moreover, her work and career seem to express some of UC Berkeley’s best qualities: resilience, subversion, and inventiveness. The now 79-year-old Kingston plans to release her last novel after she dies, and she is inventing a form for the posthumous work. In March she told *The New Yorker*, “I know I can die at any moment. So, I was writing a work that could end at any moment” (Hsu 2020).

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Forgotten Chapters of Department History: #2 Professor Dorothee Finkelstein

By Natalie Stone



Although adversity is often considered a routine condition of human life, rarely does it forge an academic and personal strength as resolute as that of Professor Dorothee Finkelstein, the second woman to be tenured in the English Department. Escaping the Russian Revolution as a young child and later immigrating to Britain to avoid the threat of Nazi-dominated Eastern Europe, Finkelstein also began her academic work amid the tensions of the founding of the State of Israel. At Berkeley, she taught in the midst of the social upheaval of the Free Speech Movement. These events not only shaped her political convictions but were also bound up with her scholarly work and her deep love of literature.

Dorothee Finkelstein was born in 1914 in Koenigsberg, Germany, under the surname Metlitzki. Both of her parents were Jewish, and her family moved back to her father's birthplace in Russia in 1917, just before the Russian Revolution broke out. This was the first of several historical events that would to disrupt Finkelstein's life. The Revolution's political turmoil led to her father's imprisonment and her mother's escape with her to St. Petersburg. She spent two years separated from her father until he was freed, and then her family fled once again to Lithuania, where she spent the rest of her childhood and received her secondary education at a German Gymnasium. At age 19, Finkelstein was dislocated again when Hitler took power in Germany, creating insecurity among the Jews not only in Germany but also in neighboring countries. She moved to London, where she attended University College, pursuing both Bachelor's and Master's Degrees in Arabic and medieval English.

Her study of Arabic language and literature inspired a passionate interest in the Middle East, so at the age of 24 she moved to Palestine, then a British protectorate, where she lived for 15 years. The WWII years brought her tremendous personal loss: she was married and widowed twice. But she also gave birth to a daughter and took an active part in the Zionist movement. In Palestine (later Israel), Finkelstein was able to combine Arabic and English studies through her development of the English Department at Hebrew University. And despite the historic turmoil and repeated confrontations with personal adversity, she continued working for the causes she found most important. She

helped to found the state of Israel in 1948, and she had many Arab as well as Israeli friends. As a Jewish woman who had lived through the Holocaust, she profoundly understood the essentiality of protecting the rights of traditionally ostracized groups, leading her to create an agency within the Israeli Federation of Labor specifically designed to safeguard Arab women. She envisioned a bi-lingual and bi-cultural state in Israel, which she thought could combine elements of Western and Arabic cultures.

Even after leaving Israel for the U.S. in 1953, Finkelstein continued her efforts to explore bridges between East and West in her academic work, which she began professionally upon receiving her doctorate at Yale University in 1957. There she met Jacob Finkelstein, her third husband, and together they moved to Berkeley after he was offered an assistant professorship. Dorothee Finkelstein was only offered a job as a lecturer despite her doctorate and the fact that Yale University Press was about to publish her first book, *Melville's Orienda*, on Herman Melville's use of Islamic elements in his fiction. Such devaluations of women's scholarly status were typical of the time. Ultimately, though, the English Department did recognize Finkelstein's immense learning and excellent scholarship. She became well-known among students and colleagues for her linguistic prowess: she was fluent in eight languages. Her first book received excellent reviews, and she was one of the most esteemed lecturers in the English Department. These factors led to her finally receiving tenure as an associate professor in 1965, only the second tenured woman in the department's ninety-six year history.

In her scholarly work, Finkelstein consistently promoted intercultural exchange and understanding by demonstrating the contributions made to Western thought by Arabic learning and literature. One reviewer of *Melville's Orienda*, for example, explained that it "not only defines an important, aspect of Melville's literary background" but also "throws light on the large, neglected area of Near Eastern influences in American literature" (Wright, 419). Similar assessments came from reviewers of her later work, especially *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (1977), which mapped the even larger, neglected areas of Near Eastern influences in Western medieval learning and culture generally and in Middle-English literature specifically. Her research and scholarly writing thus continued her attempts in Jerusalem to find a meeting ground between Arab and Jewish people, attempts that were inspired by her multiple personal experiences of discrimination and displacement.

Her many close brushes with historical catastrophe also apparently helped make her a riveting and charismatic teacher. Knowledge of her classroom presence comes to us from students at both Berkeley and Yale who were devoted to her. A former Yale student explained the personal basis of Finkelstein's unusual appeal in a profile posted on *The Jewish Women's Archive*: "One of the greatest sources of her sadness, as well as a source of her charm, was that her past was always with her. She was highly conscious of being a woman, alone, struggling for survival and recognition in a man's world" (Sen). Berkeley students were similarly mesmerized by the range of her scholarly knowledge and her

historical experience, although Finkelstein's personal history was not yet widely known when she taught here. In 1965, she separated from her husband, reclaimed her maiden name of Metlitzki, and returned to Yale, where the English Department had offered her a tenured position. Although it's been fifty-five years since Finkelstein taught at Berkeley, one of her former students, alumna and writer Kim Chernin, still recalls the strong impression she made as a teacher during her last year in Berkeley and under the stressful teaching conditions of the Free Speech Movement. Chernin's complete recollection is posted separately on this page, but its conclusion bears repeating: "This woman, our English professor, had found a way to transform crisis and near-disaster into self-transformation, development and social commitment."

Although she spent the rest of her career at Yale, Finkelstein seemed not quite at home there. According to the profile in the *Jewish Women's Archive*,

Although fluent in so many languages and living on so many continents, she never quite found her place in the world. When asked where she was from, she did not know how to answer. She very much resembled some of the translators of medieval times about whom she wrote, who traveled from place to place in the pursuit of knowledge and found their homes in their books. She liked to say that one could not separate one's personal life from one's scholarly work. That was certainly true about her. (Sen)

The Berkeley English Department was lucky to have this intrepid intellectual sojourner for eight crucial years of her career. Finkelstein combined her impressive academic abilities with the individual knowledge drawn from her life experiences to inspire the critical and artistic talents of her students.

She passed away in April of 2001, and we hope this portrait will help revive and keep her legacy alive the Berkeley English Department.

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Reflections on Dorothee Finkelstein
By Alumna Kim Chernin

The perennial question about memory: how much should we trust it? I've been asked to write about my favorite English teacher at Berkeley in the early 1960s, but after fifty-six years I know my memory might play tricks, might even make things up in an effort to be true to what happened. Memory is probably the original novelist, and this short memoir of Finkelstein the teacher is an attempt to explain something that haunts me, something not understood at the time it happened.

Memory tells me that she once cried in class. But why did she cry, if indeed she did?

The time: Fall, 1964, the beginning of the Free Speech Movement. The scene: University of California at Berkeley. The place: a senior honors seminar in Wheeler Hall. The purpose: the study of Melville over two semesters with the same professor. The proposed outcome: A Senior Honor's Thesis on Melville's writing. Our professor was Dorothee Finkelstein, whom I had chosen because she'd also been my instructor for the Freshman English class. She was a vibrant, charismatic woman in what must have been her early fifties. We were a group of ten or twelve seniors with various reasons for wanting to study Melville. My reason was clear and unambiguous: I wanted to work with this Professor. Melville, at least in the beginning, was less important to me.

Our class was taking place during the Free Speech Movement, which I recollect through what seem snap-shots borrowed perhaps from photographs taken at the time. Memory insists that these were recorded by me through active participation in the events, as if memory had decided to present itself as a photographer. We students were protesting a ban on political activities on campus. The events I remember took place in Sproul Plaza in front of the administration building. One of the spontaneously emerging student leaders, Jack Weinberg, in protest against the ban, set up a table with political information in Sproul Plaza. (snap-shot) He was arrested and held in a police car soon surrounded by some 3,000 protestors (snap-shot) that kept the police car from moving for 36 hours. I see Mario Savio, the principle student leader, making a speech on top of the surrounded car. (snap-shot). I recall: the mass sit-in to support the student-faculty strike (snap-shot). I took part in the heady, angry atmosphere that called the large number of student supporters out of their class rooms, jubilant about protesting what felt like an arbitrary authoritarian administration. I can't remember whether our classes with Finkelstein were cancelled during the strike, which I am inclined to doubt, and whether if they were not I attended them. Certainly, I stopped attending other classes.

A class with Finkelstein: I remember the quality of high-seriousness she brought to our discussions of Melville, a quality I deeply admired at the time but could not describe until many years later. Looking back, I would say it was a controlled and sublimated passion for serious scholarship which was never dogmatic and which inspired a rapt kind of almost breathless attention among the students. We didn't fidget or ask unnecessary questions, we felt called to be

at our best, as serious about our studies as she was about them. Outside the classroom protesting students were being dragged down the steps of the administration building, their arms twisted behind their backs, while we in class were sober and concentrated, convinced by the dedicated quality of her presence that what we were doing also mattered. But I'm not sure for how long. I don't think I would have missed a class with her, even if I were the only student attending it, but there is no way that memory can verify this. This is one of those gaps it would like to fill in with the image of me sitting on with her when the rest of the class had dispersed to attend the student-faculty strike, memory is trying hard to get me to see it like that but I remain uncertain.

That was, as I have said, the Fall semester of 1964. Our classes were re-established in the Spring semester, however much or how little they had been disrupted in the fall. Close to the end of the semester, the class had been reading Melville's *Billy Budd*, a short novel, written nearly forty years after *Moby Dick* and, if possible, even more deeply troubling and mysterious. Billy Budd, our hero, is an embodiment of Melville's Handsome Sailor, a gifted, beautiful, physically strong young seaman, looked up to and admired by his fellows. The plot is a complex moral parable, involving Budd, who awakens the perverse love-hate of Claggard, the master-at-arms, a man Melville describes as possessing a depravity according to nature, and Vere, the Commander of the war ship, whose nickname is Starry Vere, to suggest a somewhat dreamy quality in his nature. Given this uneasy triangle, what happens proves to be inevitable, but for the decision over life and death the Commander ultimately makes. Claggard falsely accuses Budd, who, outraged and speechless, strikes and kills Claggard. Vere, who understands that Claggard is to blame, feels that he has no choice but to hang Billy, sacrificing the innocent boy to the upholding of the mutiny law which requires that in war-time a seaman who has caused the death of a superior must be hung. It was essential for the class to understand that Vere is in no doubt of Claggard's natural depravity or Billy's goodness; he is a thoughtful, honorable officer who cannot avoid the imperative necessity, our Professor insisted, when threatened by mutiny, to uphold the law.

The class was in an uproar. It was justified to sacrifice Billy, this charming, twenty-one-year-old seaman who had been impressed into the war ship's service? We ourselves had just been involved in protest against arbitrary authority, we simply could not understand the point of view of our Professor, who was at pains to assure us that there was serious danger in a mass-movement that threatened the legitimacy of the institution's rules. Our professor was profoundly moved, that was obvious. This abstract discussion must have become personal, in some way. As the conversation grew heated I thought that I observed tears in Finkelstein's eyes.

Why did she cry, if indeed she did cry? That unanswerable question created the memory's restless, haunting quality.

Who was Dorothee Finkelstein? I knew nothing about her at the time, beyond the blatant fact that she fascinated me. Years later, and not so long ago, I learned that she had been a Lecturer at the time I first encountered her in my Freshman English class, and seven years later (I had been away in Europe for several years) she had become a tenured Professor, the second

woman ever to receive tenure in the department. But who was she? And would that knowledge explain the tears in her eyes?

She was born Dorothee Metlitzki, in Germany in 1914 (which made her 50 years old at the time I studied Melville with her). Her father, Israel, being involved in international trade, moved the family to Russia, where he was imprisoned by the Bolsheviks during the Revolution. His family fled to St. Petersburg. They were brought together again when her father, set free by his own workers, fled with them to a seaside town in Lithuania, where Dorothee studied in the German Gymnasium. In 1933, when Dorothee was 19 years old and Hitler was assuming power, she moved to London to continue her studies. During the first 19 years of her life she experienced transplantation from Germany to Russia, flight from the Russian Revolution, Hitler's coming to power, and a further dislocation in the move to London. She did not tell us about these events when she was teaching us about Melville.

Why did she cry, if indeed she did cry? Do these events answer that question? In London she was part of the literary world, friends with Robert Graves, Lawrence Durrell and Olivia Manning and belonged to the circle of Abba Eban and Moshe Sharett, the eventual second prime minister of Israel. In 1939, at the brink of the Second World War, she left England for Palestine, having participated in the Zionist movement since she was a young girl. She had by then achieved a B.A. and two M.A.s, in classical Arabic and medieval English.

This woman, our English professor, had found a way to transform crisis and near-disaster into self-transformation, development and social commitment. She was a co-founder of the English Department at Hebrew university, she participated in the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, and created an agency in the Israeli Federation of Labor to safe-guard the rights of Arab Women. As a spokeswoman for Israel, with a profound commitment to a bi-cultural, bi-national state, she traveled to the United States in 1951, returning three years later to study for her Ph.D. at Yale, which she had accomplished at the age of 43, in 1957. During those years, from 1944 to 1950, she married and lost two husbands, one to suicide the other to cancer.

I can only imagine what shadow of revolution and social disruption, personal loss and upheaval was evoked by our student rebellion, and how her interpretation of Melville was influenced by this life-history. Professors at the time did not talk about their personal lives. We did not know she had written an influential book on Melville, or the fact that she knew eight languages, or the reasons for her personal charisma, or the sense she managed to impart to us that study and literature mattered at least as much as a student protest against authority. Looking back, I can only reflect on how often books and scholarship must have saved her sanity and given her the unforgettable presence, the intensity and personal authority we encountered, without in the least understanding, when tears came to her eyes as she spoke to us about the necessity to sacrifice the beautiful boy to the imperative necessity of the rule of law.

Why did she cry, if indeed she did cry? Memory clutched the experience of the unforgettable professor for 56 years until I recently learned about her participation in the

upheavals of history. Conjuring that memory from 56 years ago, I would now not hesitate to say yes, indeed, without doubt, I saw tears in her eyes.

Kim Chernin, English Department alumna and author of numerous books, died of Covid-19 in December of 2020.

The Transition Team

Ten Women Who Joined the English Department from 1966 to 1985

Compiled by Catherine Gallagher

The ten women profiled here helped transform the English Department's faculty from a male bastion, where only two females had ever received tenure, to its current condition of gender parity.

Of course, the change was part of a general cultural shift toward greater gender equality, which followed the increased availability of birth control and liberalization of sexual standards. There had also been an official university policy shift beginning in 1969-70, after national women's organizations pressured the federal government to apply the Civil Rights Act's provisions against sexual discrimination to universities. In response, UCB began requiring departments to advertise faculty jobs nationally, keep records of applications, justify deselection of candidates, and take affirmative action to ensure that there was no sexual or racial bias in their hiring processes. Before those procedures were mandated, hiring was often done by department chairs making informal inquiries among faculty at other universities about their most talented graduate students.

By the time the university adopted these policies, the English Department was already on its way toward hiring more women. It was itself an important producer of female PhDs; women had been winning admission to its graduate program in ever-greater numbers during the late 1960s. The faculty thus had an increasing interest in liberalizing the academic job market to provide jobs for their own students. The entry of the generation of the sixties, which was more used to gender equality, also changed the departmental tone, so that the conditions were ripe for making the transition from a male-dominated to a gender-equal department.

The first ten women who came into the department and were tenured in those years, though, should be credited with the smoothness and thoroughness of the transition. As the following profiles show, they were an unusually accomplished group, known not only for excellent scholarship but also for faculty leadership. Four of the ten won the coveted university-wide Distinguished Teaching Award, an extremely high proportion. Four chaired the English Department, two founded interdisciplinary undergraduate programs, two were appointed deans, one an associate dean, and one became Chancellor of university.

Transition Team

Anne Middleton (1966-2006)



Anne Middleton came to Berkeley in 1966, with a PhD from Harvard, and in 1972 became the third woman to be tenured by the English Department. She was preceded by Josephine Miles, who had been the only woman faculty member in English for most of the previous 26 years, and Dorothee Finkelstein, who stayed at Berkeley for only 5 years. In 1980, Middleton was the second woman to be promoted to Full Professor in 1980. She was the first of a new generation of faculty women, who would be hired and tenured with increasing frequency in the 1970s and 80s. With her hiring, the English Department began the continuous progress toward gender parity on the faculty, which is now just over 50% female.

Middleton was an internationally renowned scholar in the field of English medieval literature, publishing abundantly in academic journals. A collection of her essays—*Chaucer, Langland and Fourteenth Century Literary History* (2013)—was edited by Professor Stephen Justice and published in 2013. She substantially reshaped the field of English Medieval Studies, introducing many interdisciplinary methods. She won awards and fellowships for her scholarship, including Guggenheim and American Council of Learned Societies fellowships, and the International Piers Plowman Society has memorialized her contributions by creating the Anne Middleton Book Prize.

She won awards for her teaching as well, including the university's Distinguished Teaching award. The Northern California Phi Beta Kappa Association gave her an *Excellence in Teaching Award* (1999) to commemorate her inspirational work as an educator. She was especially well known for her attentiveness to undergraduate writing; she often returned first drafts to students with "every page covered in hand written notes" (<https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/in-memoriam/files/anne-middleton.html>). Middleton was equally important as a faculty leader, serving as the department's Chair from 1988 to 1992. She also worked tirelessly on Academic Senate committees throughout her career. She held the Florence Green Bixby Chair, and upon retirement, was awarded the Berkeley Citation for her distinguished and effective leadership.

[Academic Senate In Memoriam by Professor Steven Justice](https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/in-memoriam/files/anne-middleton.html)
<https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/in-memoriam/files/anne-middleton.html>.

The New Chaucer Society, In Memoriam by Professor Steven Justice.

Transition Team

Janet Adelman (1968-2009)

Janet Adelman received her PhD from Yale and joined the Berkeley faculty as an Assistant Professor in 1968. In 1972, she became the English Department's fourth tenured female faculty member and eventually served as department chair from 1999 to 2002.

As a scholar and teacher, Adelman used psychoanalytic and feminist theoretic frameworks to illuminate the works of William Shakespeare, especially their gender and racial dimensions. Early in her career, with a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies, she explored psychoanalysis at the Hampstead and Tavistock Clinics in London, an experience that informed her crucial contributions to the field. Her ground-breaking books on these topics include: *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays* (1992) and *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (2008).



In addition to being an innovative critic, Adelman was also a favorite of Berkeley students, and the centrality of Shakespeare to the English department's curriculum allowed a high percentage of majors to benefit from her teaching. She was equally effective in small seminars and large lecture halls. Her lectures on Shakespeare were at once penetrating analyses and humanizing first-person encounters with works that students had often previously thought intimidatingly unapproachable. "Ten things you must do before graduating from Berkeley", a student guide of the 1990s, listed taking a course with her as its only academic imperative. She received both the Distinguished Teaching Award (1986) and the Faculty Award for Outstanding Mentorship of Graduate Student Instructors (2006). She continued to teach undergraduate courses, many at the introductory level, following her 2007 retirement. At the age of sixty-nine, Emerita Janet Adelman succumbed to lung cancer in 2010, leaving behind an unforgettable legacy.

[In Memoriam by Professor Elizabeth Abel](#)

<https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/files/inmemoriam/html/janetadelman.html..>

[Berkeley News Article](#)

[Wikipedia Profile](#)

Photo Credit: Brian Osserman

Transition Team

Carol T. Christ (1970-2002; 2015-Present)

Carol Christ is famous for being the first woman to lead UC Berkeley as Chancellor. Forty-seven years before achieving that milestone, her academic career began in the English Department. In 1970, with a PhD from Yale, she joined UC as an Assistant Professor of English with a focus on British Victorian Literature; she was tenured in 1975. During the 1970s, she was an active member of the Department's Women's Caucus, and she taught the first women's literature courses.

Christ publishes scholarly works of criticism on Victorian literature, including two books: *The Finer Optic: The Aesthetic of Particularity in Victorian Poetry* (1975) and *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (1994). Moreover, even while devoting herself to university administration, she has continued to publish articles on British literature and to edit the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

Her promotion to full professor was followed by a continuous rise up UCB's administrative ladder. She served as the English Department's first woman Chair in 1985-88 and soon ascended into the highest ranks of university leadership: Dean of Humanities; Provost and Dean of L&S; Vice Chancellor and Provost; and Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost. In 2002, Christ left Berkeley to become the President of Smith College. Upon retiring from Smith, she returned to live in Berkeley and was soon coaxed back into university service. Appointed Chancellor in 2017, Carol Christ has steadily navigated the university through several of the most critical junctures in its history.

Even while tackling immense administrative challenges, though, she has somehow found the time to teach freshman and sophomore seminars in the English Department.



[Office of the Chancellor Biography](#)

[Department Profile](#)

[Daily California Article](#)

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Transition Team

Carolyn Porter (1974-2006)

After receiving a PhD in American Literature from Rice University in 1973, Carolyn Porter joined the Berkeley English Department in 1974 as an Assistant Professor. She would go on to be the sixth female faculty member to receive tenure in the department, serving until her retirement in 2006. Porter's teaching and research specialty was American literature throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, with particular interests in gender and sexuality, critical theory, and narrative and the novel. Porter's books examine both nineteenth and twentieth American writers, and they converge on the works of William Faulkner. They include two books: *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant-Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner* (1981) and *William Faulkner: Lives and Legacies* (2007).



In addition to being one of the first women to join the English Department in the early 1970s, Porter was also a trusted university administrator. One of just two English Department faculty women to be appointed a dean (Carol Christ was the other), she was named to be both the Dean of Undergraduate Education and the Dean of the Division of Undergraduate and Interdisciplinary Studies in the late 1990s. At a time when interdisciplinary work was expanding among the faculty, Porter created and coordinated programs that allowed students to share in the cross-departmental synergy. Her administrative career began earlier, when she had served as director of UC Berkeley's Women's Studies Program from 1983-86, guiding it along a path to departmentalization. She was also a co-director the American Studies Program in the early 1990s

Even after her retirement in 2006, Porter continued to be active in the English department as a Professor Emerita, returning in 2015 to teach a course on American Literature from 1900-1945. She is working on a new book about Faulkner entitled, "Grim Sires and Spectral Mothers: the Family in Faulkner."

[Department Profile](#)

[Berkeley Academia](#)

Photo Credit: Berkeley Academia

Transition Team

Ann Banfield (1975-2010)

Ann Banfield received her PhD. in English from the University of Wisconsin in 1973, but she had begun studying linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1966-68, setting the course of her future research. While still a graduate student, Banfield taught at the Université de Paris 8 (1969-70), and before joining the Berkeley English Department in 1975, she taught at the University of Washington (1973-75).

After arriving at Berkeley, she remained in the department for over three decades. In that time, Banfield earned many fellowships: ACLS and Guggenheim Fellowships, a University of California President's Fellowship, and two residential fellowships at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Study Center, and one at Durham University's Institute of Advanced Study. The result has been a series of publications that helped shape contemporary narrative theory, including three groundbreaking books: *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (1982), *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (2000), and *Describing the Unobserved and Other Essays* (2018). Professor Banfield's works have never been narrowly limited to an individual field; her research explores a combination of English, French, Linguistics, and Philosophy. Banfield continues to make contributions to several disciplines and is now working on a critical study and analysis of the works of Samuel Beckett.



[Department Profile](#)

[Durham University Profile](#)

[Wikipedia Article](#)

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Transition Team

Julia Bader (1975-2010)

After completing her PhD at UC Berkeley, Julia Bader was hired as an Assistant Professor in the English Department in 1975. She was tenured in 1980 and retired in 2010. She published a book in 1972—*Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels*—and continued to write on Nabokov and other twentieth-century American writers, such as Flannery O'Connor, and Henry James.

Her teaching and research interests have increasingly been devoted to film studies. She has taught numerous courses on film, exploring the works of Alfred Hitchcock, Woody Allen, and the Coen Brothers, as well as broad topics like women's film, comedy and film noir. She has presented scholarly papers at international conferences, and she plays an active role in the local film community, even serving as a judge for the Eisner Prize contest in short film at BAMPFA. During an interview with the *Daily Cal*, Professor Bader discussed the quest for self-knowledge and the representations of technology in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*; she also commented on how the pervasiveness of electronic devices affects personal relationships. As a Professor Emerita, she continues to teach undergraduate seminars.



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Transition Team

Frances Ferguson (1977-1988)



Hired as an Associate Professor in 1977, Professor Frances Ferguson became the eighth tenured female faculty member in the English Department and was promoted to full professor in 1986. Although Ferguson spent just over a decade at UC Berkeley, during that time she published her highly influential article, “Rape and the Rise of the Novel” (1987). Ferguson was a founding member of the humanities interdisciplinary journal *Representations*, which was started by Berkeley faculty in the early 1980s. She had already produced her first book on British romanticism when she came to Berkeley—*Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit*—and her

second—*Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and Aesthetics of Individuation*—appeared shortly after she left to take a job at Johns Hopkins University.

Her research interests were not confined to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and her post-Berkeley writings have included essays on the philosophies of Kant, Burke, and Bentham, and an additional book, *Pornography, The Theory: What Utilitarianism Did To Action* (2005). She moved to the University of Chicago in 2012, where she is the Battenwieser Professor of English and the Editor-in-Chief of *Critical Inquiry*, the country's premier journal of literary criticism. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

[Gray Center Profile](#)

[UChicago Faculty Profile](#)

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[Humanities Division at Chicago](#)

Transition Team

Catherine Gallagher (1980-2012)



The ninth female faculty member to be tenured in the English Department, Catherine Gallagher studies and teaches the history and theory of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British novel. Her research has examined the intersections between the history of social and economic discourses and the development of literary forms. Professor Gallagher published many works of literary criticism and history, which include: *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-67* (1985); *Practicing New Historicism* (2000); *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (2006). In 1994, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* won the MLA James Russell Lowell Prize for an outstanding literary study, and the American Philosophical Society awarded her most recent book, *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction* (2018), the Jaques Barzun Prize for the best work of the year in cultural history. She was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2002.

Gallagher was Chair of the English Department in 2002-5 and again in 2008-9. She was the first alumna to become chair, and she undertook several initiatives to open channels of communication with the department's many thousands of alumni. The connections with alumni later helped launch the Berkeley Connect program, the prototype of which was designed and initiated in the English Department in 2009. In the years before her retirement, she helped found the university's Human Rights Interdisciplinary Minor. In 2020, she became the co-chair of the 150W History Project, which has documented the 150-year history of women at Berkeley. This is the first attempt by the university to research, record, analyze, and restore the legacy of the women who contributed to the university we now know. Upon retirement she was given the Berkeley Citation for making extraordinary contributions to the university.

[Faculty Profile](#)

[Wikipedia Article](#)

[Jacques Barzun](#)

[Center for Humanities](#)

Transition Team

Elizabeth F. Abel (1983-Present)

Professor Elizabeth Abel joined the Berkeley English Department in 1982 as an Assistant Professor, after earning her PhD at Princeton in 1975 and teaching for several years at the University of Chicago. She soon became well-known as the editor behind a groundbreaking collection of essays, *Writing and Sexual Difference*, which helped change the methods of feminist criticism. She earned tenure in 1988. For thirty-seven years, Abel has continued to serve the department as one of its most talented and dedicated teachers; she was given the Distinguished Teaching Award, the campus's top teaching honor, in 1997. Her research and teaching span American and British literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with two broad emphases: gender and sexuality in relation to psychoanalysis and the visibility of race and culture. Her publications include her solo books: *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (1989) and *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (2010). She has also published several collaborative volumes: *The Signs Reader on Women, Gender, and Scholarship*; *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*; *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1997). Her own writing and her role in disseminating the work of others have made Abel a leading feminist theorist.



Abel's teaching, like her research, focuses on gender and race through the lenses of 20th century fiction and visual imagery. When she won the university's Distinguished Teaching Award in 1997, her students praised her for turning the classroom into an open and exploratory intellectual space. Even in large lecture courses, her students reported that she shows a concern for the students as individual learners. One student explained, "She has brought off the near alchemical task of teaching us to examine the texts in relevant ways through a lecture style that invites class participation." "My philosophy of teaching," Abel noted, "is grounded in my desire to help students develop and trust their own voices in the midst of the tumultuous debates unfolding in the humanities today." (<https://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/97legacy/teaching.html>).

Abel continues to teach both graduate and undergraduate courses for the department, while writing her new book, *Woolf Tracks: Remapping Modernist Genealogies*.

[Wikipedia Profile](#)

[Department Profile](#)

Photo Credit: Yanina Gotsulsky

Transition Team

Susan Schweik (1983-Present)



Hired by the English Department in 1983, Susan Schweik was tenured in 1991. She is an innovative scholar and teacher in the fields of American literature, feminist theory, civil rights history, and disability studies. Professor Schweik's published work includes many articles and two solo books, *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War* (1991), and *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (2010). The latter is a social and cultural history of ordinances adopted by some American cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that prohibited "diseased," "maimed," and "deformed" people from exposing themselves to public view. Schweik is now at work on a new book, with the working title *Unfixed: How the Women of Glenwood Asylum Overturned Ideas About IQ*.

Only a few years into her teaching career, in 1989, Professor Schweik received the Distinguished Teaching Award. At the time, Schweik primarily taught 19th-and 20th-century American poetry, and she was praised for fostering an informal classroom atmosphere in both lecture courses and seminars, which encouraged student participation in discussions. Her scholarly work, teaching, and university service have been deeply intertwined. As a tenured member of the faculty, she designed and led the Disability Studies Program at Berkeley, for which she invented and co-taught a number of courses that have given students an opportunity to study with leading disabilities scholars and activists from around the world. And she helped design the Inclusion Initiative in which students work as personal care attendants while also taking a seminar in disability studies. She held the Presidential Chair in Undergraduate Education for Disability Studies, and her dedication to the development of disability studies at Berkeley has led to several other initiatives, for which she was given the Chancellor's Award for Advancing Institutional Excellence (2007). Schweik's administrative talents have also been tapped by the Dean's office, where she has served many years as the Associate Dean of Arts and Humanities.

[Faculty Profile](#)

[Syracuse Distinguished Scholar](#)

[Profile by the Othering&Belonging Institute](#)

An Interview with Poet and Professor Lyn Hejinian

Conducted by Emma Campbell, Kahyun Koh, and Anya Vertanessian in April, 2020

1. *Who or what inspired you to pursue a career in poetry? How would you describe your poetic style?*



LH: I think the first inspiration was my father's typewriter. On weekdays he worked in the administration at UC Berkeley (he was Assistant and then Associate Dean of Men—that was the name of the position at the time) and he tried to be a writer at night and on weekends. He wrote some poetry—he had been a student of Josephine Miles when he was an undergraduate at UC Berkeley; but by the time I am referring to he was writing novels. He wrote several, but not much came of them, and when I was in 3rd or 4th grade he gave me his typewriter. And he took up painting; he had several shows and sold quite a lot of work. He never quit his “day job” (university administration), however.

I set the typewriter on a desk in my bedroom and began to write. Or, rather, to type. Pounding the keys and seeing sentences emerge on the page, I felt important and powerful. I was, in effect, escaping the limitations of gender. I could imagine myself as anyone and make it “real” (in print). I wrote a radio play featuring characters from a then popular children's radio show, “Bobby Benson and the B-Bar-B Riders,” a western whose main character was an orphan lad named Bobby Benson. I imagined myself as Bobby Benson and in the play “I” lived through a vast melodrama. I behaved heroically, of course.

I laugh at this now, but having the typewriter—the tool of my trade—gave me a sense of having a trade, that of a writer.

I wrote more plays and the neighborhood kids and I performed them. As I entered 7th grade, we moved to New England (my father left Berkeley for Harvard), and I wrote a

“novella”: a first person narrative written in diary form by a boy moving with his family by wagon train to California in the mid-1800s. By 9th grade I had turned to poetry. Poetry seemed far less constrained, freer of rules and narrative expectations, than fiction. I had no interest in standard poetic forms—and I still have only academic rather than practical interest in them. I wanted to think freely, let my mind wander, follow ideas (and phrases) wherever they might go. For a while—but not for very long—I used poetry to express my adolescent angst and longings, but very soon I recognized the banality and the limits of that. It wasn’t self-expression I was seeking but loss of self.

By the time I entered college, I was imagining myself as a rebel, an iconoclast. Perhaps I even really was one, but, if so, it was a life—a rebellion—in my mind and imagination. I had discovered that one could live a wild life in writing while abiding by at least the most basic social mores. Indeed, I wanted to behave myself socially, precisely so as not to get into time-consuming trouble, which would rob me of time for reading and writing (and doing the various things that people do in college, including classwork).

My freshman year, I took a year-long seminar, and, under the tutelage of the linguistic anthropologist Dorothy D. Lee, encountered the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It proposes that every language expresses a particular world view, which is embedded in the lexicon of the language and, more importantly, in its grammatical structures. We perceive the world around us in ways that our language determines. I suspect that anyone who speaks more than one language has noticed how very differently one sees and inhabits the world in each language one knows. This raised the prospect that language, which can be used so differently in poetry from the ways it is used in ordinary expository writing, might be a medium in which one could experience the world in multiple different ways. One could perceive the world differently, one could think differently.

My first work got published (a long poem in a literary journal) the year I graduated from college. Since then I’ve published some twenty or more books. Pretty much all of them represent relatively large-scale projects; they aren’t collections of individual poems. And, though perhaps some sensibility or tone that is peculiarly mine may be evident in all of them, they are stylistically distinct from one another. Language—language in the abstract, language as it sits in a dictionary, language as the raw material of thinking—has no style of its own. It’s an instrument of inquiry and discovery and an improvisatory medium. Style emerges as language is used, but I’ve never tried to develop style for its own sake.

2. *What was your path to a Berkeley professorship like? How would you describe your teaching philosophy?*

LH: My path to a Berkeley professorship was an untraditional one. I have no graduate degree and never planned on or even aspired to an academic career. I married young, had two children before I was 25 years old, and worked—usually part time (life was far less expensive throughout the first half of my lifetime than it is now)—at assorted jobs: copy-editor and “office girl” for a small academic publisher; classical guitar instructor (for 4th grade beginners—I was not much better at the guitar than they!); janitor and “office girl” for a printing company; assistant baker at a pastry shop; assistant to a private detective (doing anti-death penalty work); and a one semester, one course teaching gig at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now CCA). That CCAC course was my first teaching experience; I enjoyed it but wasn’t convinced that I knew enough to be a teacher, and it wasn’t until twelve years later, in 1990, that I began teaching in earnest. That fall I joined the Core Faculty of the Graduate Program in Poetics at New College of California (on Valencia Street in San Francisco’s Mission District), and I taught there for eight years, skipping one semester there in order to serve as the Holloway Poet in the Practice of Poetry at UC Berkeley.

It was while teaching at New College that I gained confidence as a teacher. The graduate program offered a two-year MA program, with each semester focused on the literature and literary culture of a different literary-historical period: “The Birth of the Modern (1540-1660),” “Romantics & Revolt (1770-1830),” “Making it New (1820-1870),” and “Shocks & Breaks (1900-1950).” There were no workshops; the emphasis was entirely on literary history and theory and all five of the Core Faculty members plus the occasional guest faculty member taught courses related to each of those periods.

I had read a lot but I had not previously been an academic scholar; framing my courses, doing the research necessary for teaching the material (after, first, finding out what the relevant literary works might be) and writing lecture notes for each class session of each semester was challenging. But it was also exhilarating—the awareness that there was an endless amount to discover and learn about.

In 2000 I was informed that the English Department at UC Berkeley was hoping to hire someone for a “senior poet” faculty position. I applied. In due course, I was invited to do a campus visit—to teach a graduate level master class, to meet with the Chair of the department, to meet with some of the faculty, and to give a reading. I knew that the invitation meant that I was still being considered for the position, but not that this meant I was a finalist. A date was set for my campus visit, and meanwhile I attended a four-day Modernist Studies Conference, which was held that year at the University of

Pennsylvania. I was there to give a panel paper, but I attended various other sessions including one at which Edward Saïd gave a keynote address. It was on “late style,” a term he was drawing from an essay by Theodor Adorno titled, “Late Style in Beethoven.” The lateness in question was biological age and in his keynote address, Saïd talked about works created late in life by various artists. For some, late style works reflected an acceptance of life and benevolence of spirit. This style might reflect the artist’s ultimate vision of greater harmonies than the turbulence of youth and history reveal, “a new spirit of reconciliation and serenity” as Saïd puts it; Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale* or *The Tempest* are obvious examples and these are ones that Saïd cites. “But,” Saïd goes on to ask, “what of artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction.” This is “late style” as Adorno describes it (he concludes the Beethoven essay with the famous comment, “In the history of art late works are the catastrophes”), and this is the “late style” that Saïd went on to talk about. Inspired by the lecture, being close to 60 years old and thus entering lateness myself, and, furthermore, regarding Western culture, capitalism, and, indeed, much of life on the planet as in its “late” period, I vowed to sustain in my work the qualities of “intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction” and I decided not to take the Berkeley faculty position if offered it.

I was offered the position. I felt honored. I didn’t immediately turn the position down. The idea had already occurred to me that teaching, as I’d done it and as I might in the future, was part of my work as an artist. I decided, after all, to accept the Berkeley offer and attempt to sustain an intellectual social space (in the classroom and elsewhere) in which “intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction” could be fostered as a creative, rather than bewildering, dispiriting, or stupefying, force. That has been at the heart of my teaching philosophy. It has not meant that I myself am difficult. It has meant, rather, that I have refused to simplify; I have kept a lot of ideas and materials “in the mix,” so to speak.

3. *How, if at all, has your Berkeley professorship or your time at Berkeley overall changed you? What is your favorite Berkeley experience?*

LH: You ask how my time at Berkeley has changed me; I’ve asked myself that question more than once. My education—not my formal education in school, from nursery school to the completion of a BA degree, but my formative education—has had two stages, each occurring in two-decade long periods of enormous intensity and neither, to date, over. The first, from 1975 to 1995, took place in the context of my association

with what has come to be known as Language Writing or the Language School—a group of poets, based largely in the Bay Area and in New York City, though the circulation of manuscripts and ideas included people in other parts of the country as well as in Canada and various cities in Europe. Most of us had gone to college (though not all had finished); most of us had been involved in the political as well as sociocultural turbulence (and, I’d say, utopianism) of the 1960s, and most of us throughout our careers as writers have continued to be politically engaged. All of us had carefully read modernist literature and the 1965 anthology edited by Donald Allen titled *The New American Poets*, which did much to challenge mainstream verse culture and destabilize the canon of twentieth century American poetry. And most of us were reading newly available English translations of literary and cultural theory, which was emerging from the immediate context of the May 1968 political turmoil in Europe. Many of us were also reading newly available English translations of the work of the Russian Formalists, a group of avant-garde literary scholars and theoreticians from the early twentieth century. We attended and participated in poetry readings that took place two or three or sometimes four times a week, talked until late at night at bars, launched literary journals, hosted radio shows, curated readings and lecture series. And we had very little respect for official academia, which, in turn, had very little respect for us.

In much of the work we were writing, experiments with syntax (the structure of phrases or sentences), with form (the structure of elements within a work and the structure of the work itself), with social codes (shifting from slang to “literary” language, using words from the scientific and political and pop cultural as well as literary spheres), and generally disrupting the material text (the actual language on the page and its relation to the things it did, or mostly didn’t, refer to). But there was no Language movement “style.” The possibilities were myriad (and will never be exhausted). What was, and remains, at stake are the structures that shape meaning and control (or facilitate) meaning-making. As I suggested above, all languages have ideologies embedded in them; to say anything is to express (and to impose) a world view. And, since our careers were grounded in the enormous social problems to which major 1960s and 1970s movements were responding (the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-war Movement, the Women’s Movement, the Gay Liberation Movement, and the more general countercultural movement—“sex, drugs, and rock ’n roll”), it seemed urgent to begin the work of destabilizing language so as to challenge the structures that sustained racism, sexism, militarism, and bourgeois heteronormativity—work that poets, in particular, had the skill to take on.

Perhaps this work—or, rather, the “life of the poet” as we imagined it—or as I imagined it—has always had a pedagogical element to it. I was near fifty when I began teaching in earnest, but maybe I was always doing something very close to what I’ve ended up doing as a university professor, reading widely and critically, pursuing ideas and their trajectories, and always with two goals: to figure things out, both alone and in the company of fellow poet-intellectuals, and to tell others what I was finding out. I’ve never aspired to be persuasive; my pedagogical aim has been close to that of my literary aim: to share the excitement of being a thinking conscious being fueled by curiosity and a lot of intellectual energy.

That said, though, my creative and intellectual experiences as a Berkeley professor were vastly intensified by the challenges offered by great students, great colleagues, and great teaching opportunities. Berkeley’s English Department improved my thinking and the quality of my intellectual life. The dynamic of engagement is always an interpretative process. And since the field of literary studies so often entails interpretation, I’ve spent a significant amount of my time at Berkeley so-to-speak interpreting interpretation. Or, to put that another way, I’ve tried to understand, and come to an understanding with, the structures of the university and the systems that shape literary studies and the fields it comprises. A truly candid answer to the question, “What is your favorite Berkeley experience?” would be “meeting with a couple of colleagues for drinks at Beta Lounge.” But that would also be a somewhat glib answer. A more serious and more considered answer would be “the founding of the UC Berkeley Solidarity Alliance in August 2009 and participating in the work that its many participants did to fight the privatization of UC.” The Solidarity Alliance was always an informal alliance of students, campus workers, people from the campus unions, and faculty, and together we organized protest rallies, protest marches, petitions, meetings. Political organizing is laborious; it requires a great deal of listening as well as speaking; its success depends on the expertise that different groups have to offer and it depends on trust and camaraderie. Being a part of that is certainly one of my favorite things about my Berkeley experience.

4. Out of many qualified women instructors in the English department, only one—Josephine Miles—was given a tenure track position before 1962. How, if at all, do you think Berkeley’s English Department today has changed from those earlier times of female exclusion in faculty and students?

LH: I can’t, of course, speak with any authority about the UC Berkeley English Department during the years when the poet Josephine Miles was a tenured member of it,

nor even of the department prior to my joining it. But within my twenty years on the Berkeley faculty, the make-up of the English Department faculty has changed, less because of a felt need to remedy a gender imbalance than because of a desire to respond well to the rapidly changing demographics of California and, indeed, of the U.S. more widely. In my opinion, the University of California has much to do before it can be free of institutional racism. In part, that embedded racism comes with the territory: UC is, quite simply, a massive institution, and institutions are inherently conservative, perpetually determined to replicate themselves. And the Berkeley English Department faculty is certainly still predominantly white. A quick scroll through the faculty roster on the department's website shows that there are 45 white faculty members and 15 faculty members of color. The number of male and female faculty members, however, is close to equal (31 male and 29 female). That said, the ratio of male full professor to female full professor shows a clear imbalance (18 male and 8 female).

As for the grad student population—it seems that the gender balance is close to perfect. I didn't attempt to guess the racial/ethnic identity (or identities) of the grad student population. And I have no way to do any analysis of the undergraduate English major population, but my experience strongly suggests that more of those students are female than male.

5. What advice do you have for undergraduate women who are aspiring writers and/or academics in Berkeley's English Department? Are there any literary or writing resources at Berkeley that you might recommend to students?

LH: I'm reluctant to give advice in any general way either to aspiring writers or aspiring academics. But, since it's pretty much always the case that undergraduate women at Berkeley are smart and interesting and therefore wonderful to talk with, and to the degree that I am genuinely interested in their ideas, projects, and aspirations, I can offer support and a kind of intellectual and creative fellowship. But if I really had to give advice to aspiring young women writers in particular, I'd suggest that they read—widely and, to the extent that time allows, randomly and inventively. I'd suggest that they write, and not always or only “sincerely.” Write badly, write lies, pay attention constantly to the language around you. Write yourself into strange or dangerous places, write things you don't understand. And always write in ways that make you excited to be writing. And I'd suggest that they keep asking themselves what they are doing and why they are doing it? What's poetry? What do poets do? What's fiction? What do fiction writers do? What's “creative nonfiction” (a strange category, since, for example, all scholarly writing—even

term papers—can be said to be “creative nonfiction)? What’s at stake in your writing—that’s a question with which all writers, regardless of gender and regardless of age, have to keep posing to themselves. There’s no possible final answer to those questions. Writing is hard and the task is endless. I’ve found that the same is true of academic life. Gertrude Stein once said that she abandoned her novel *The Making of Americans* because she realized that, after writing 1000 pages of what was to be a description of every kind of person there could be, she decided not to “go on with what was begun because after all I know I really do know that it can be done and if it can be done why do it.” Living the life of a writer and and of a literary thinker can’t be done, and that, I think, is why I going on doing it.

6. *Several years ago, you were a faculty sponsor for a departmental student group on women in intellectual life. What was your experience working with this group?*

LH: The events that comprised the “Women in Intellectual Life” series took place monthly during the fall and spring semesters for around five years. They were intended as informal conversations about a range of issues affecting women living as intellectuals, but, since they were happening in a university setting, the focus was largely on academic life. Many of them had themes. Among them were “Undertaking Professionalism” (critiquing patriarchal models of the “professional” or the “professor,” pointing out or imagining alternative ways to inhabit the social spaces in which ideas are discussed, learned, and taught, laughing at pomposity, etc.); “The Work/Life Balance” (or work/life imbalance; strategies for dealing with the choices that intellectual work asks women to make); “Addressing Aggression(s)” (discussing instances of misogyny, intellectual bullying or belittlement, sexual harassment, and brainstorming strategies for addressing them); “Women, Allies, Caseworkers” (discussing the ways in which women are expected to do much of the care work that keeps intellectual spaces functioning—and the ways that women expect themselves to do that work); “Women, Privilege, Difference” (a conversation intended to acknowledge and support the differences among women intellectuals—differences of class, race, intellectual and cultural as well as sexual orientation, etc.); “The Future of Women in Intellectual Life” (what might we imagine or hope for, and how do we bring it about?).

There were other themes, and very often the conversation digressed because some pressing concern got articulated, often just in the course of discussion, but we typically at least started “on topic.” Usually a couple of women faculty members and a couple of women grad students provided a few brief initial remarks—really just offering thoughts

to open the conversation. A few men came to the conversations, but most of them came only to listen. Most of the participants were women in the English Department, though there were also some regulars from Comp. Lit. The conversations were warm and sometimes cathartic. And, at least in my experience, some strong friendships and alliances were forged during the course of them.

In the spring of 2018, the energy tapered off. It may have been a mistake for us to meet every month. That seemed crucial during the first year—there was so much to say and the women involved very much wanted the camaraderie that talking honestly about the particular difficulties (and pleasures) of being a woman intellectual can provide. But we probably exhausted the conversation—or got exhausted just because we were at the end of an academic year and stressed out by classes and meetings and teaching.

Professor Hejinian retired in the spring of 2020 and is now Professor Emerita.

The Zambian-American Perspective: An Interview with Namwali Serpell

Conducted by Lucia Salazar and Francesca Hodges, November 2019



Professor Namwali Serpell's debut novel, *The Old Drift* (2019), demonstrates her prowess as a fiction writer. It was an immediate success: a *New York Times* bestseller and recipient of the Windham-Campbell Prize for fiction. *The Old Drift* discloses Serpell's Zambian-American perspective and the multiplicity of her environments. "It is about Zambia", she told us, "and the writing that I do continues to be both American and Zambian, rather than Zambian-American".

Serpell is the product of a Zambian heritage and an American education, moving from Zambia to Baltimore at the age of nine. She pursued an undergraduate degree in literature at Yale University before turning towards a PhD in American and British Fiction at Harvard University. She joined the Berkeley English Department in 2008, and has since taught classes both traditional and of her own design. Berkeley has provided Serpell with a drastically different domain from the east coast schools where she trained, as she reflects.

"Berkeley is rough and tumble, and political and scrappy. I think that the students are brilliant and curious and eager to learn and grateful for knowledge." At Yale and Harvard, where she taught as a graduate student, "the students are less open about what they don't know. And therefore are less likely to learn new things". "I have discovered a lot of energy around learning here, and a lot of openness to difference. So, here there's an understanding that there are different learning styles, and different people's experiences bring something to the classroom. There isn't an attempt to corral all of that variety into a single, perfect student. Instead, there's an expansion of what it means to be a student."

Serpell finds that the unusual freedom of students' academic endeavors is partnered with the freedom the English Department gives her to design her own courses, which she describes as "immensely useful". The position was originally advertised for a specialist in 20th-Century literature, she explains, "but I think only one of my classes fits that description. And being allowed to teach, for example, the course on the novel since 2000" is extremely unusual. "There aren't many institutions that teach courses on novels that contemporary," Serpell said. Such courses keep Serpell's literary-critical courses close to her interests as a creative writer.

Two developments in the English Department since her arrival in 2008 have been striking to Serpell: the inclusion of more creative writing courses and a greater diversity in the teaching staff. “We’ve hired a lot of young faculty: many of color, many female, many queer, and that has diversified the department which has been great,” Serpell said. “I think there’s also been more of an attempt to theorize and capitalize on the fact that the faculty does both critical and creative work. We’ve done searches for fiction writers, like Fiona McFarlane, who is also a critic. We’ve brought in different speakers who work in both, and Berkeley Connect is a place where people can talk about the creative and critical writing they do. I think it’s not that we weren’t both critics and creative writers before, but now the department has a self-understanding that this is its strength.” Through the English Department’s negotiation between the critical and the creative, faculty like Serpell successfully find their footing, straddling between two interests.

While *The Old Drift* brought Serpell deserved praise, her repertoire does not start and end with her debut novel. Her work appears often in *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *Freeman’s*. Indeed, a 2019 short story, “Take It”, trenchantly satirizes the lack of socioeconomic self-awareness often found in Berkeley, where the comfortable millionaires in the hills live only blocks away from the homeless in People’s Park. Her short story centers on a young boy who gets invited to a naked party. The boy, from a less privileged background than the bohemian Berkeley attendees, decides to steal their carelessly discarded belongings and run.

The genesis of the story, Serpell explains, was an incident from her student days at Yale: “We threw a naked party and kids from the neighborhood were invited in, by some irresponsible undergraduates. They were thirteen- or fourteen-year old kids, and they stole people’s stuff. I was thinking, ‘Good for them.’” Serpell said, “I’d always wanted to write that story. And living on the border between Berkeley and Oakland for the first three years that I was working here, close to the Ashby BART station, I felt a very similar town-and-gown tension between the college town Berkeley and Oakland that I’d found between Yale and the surrounding city of New Haven”.

But why, we wondered, transplant the story to Berkeley? “It’s hard to explain why certain things about a place seep into your imagination, but I felt compelled to try to explain this class dynamic, this race dynamic, and I felt like I wanted to set it in a place where I could observe it happening now, rather than back in the 90s when it happened to me on the East Coast,” Serpell said. She wanted to explore being between incompatible places: “I wanted to capture that specific feeling you have when you can just walk a block and be in a different world altogether. I wanted to explore how it feels to negotiate those worlds”.

Serpell’s time in Berkeley-Oakland has given her a new and different relation to America in both art and life. To illustrate the latter, Serpell shared her story of becoming a citizen. “I became a US citizen a few years ago, shortly after the election, in 2017, and

took my oath in Oakland at the Paramount, the big movie theatre there. I think that sense of becoming an American in the context of a Californian immigration world is very different from what it would have been had I become a citizen on the East Coast,” Serpell said. “It was huge with people from everywhere. Oakland is a space that has always had this kind of embrace of multiplicities, so I was really happy to do it there.”

However, she also clarified her surprising reason for becoming an American citizen—a reason that speaks to the bubbling political tension in the United States. “I became a citizen not to vote, but to protest, which is again telling. Protests, because of the first travel bans in SFO, which is federal property so if you get arrested on federal property you can get deported,” Serpell said. “Hence, the fact that I couldn’t go to SFO to protest against the unconscionable actions of this government, which I’ve been paying taxes to since I became an adult, was just too infuriating for me.” And so her desire to participate in a protest inspired her embrace of American citizenship.

The paradox of becoming an insider in order to stay an outsider recurs in Serpell’s work, as she repeatedly explores and celebrates the role of the “alien”. Her upcoming non-fiction book, *Stranger Faces*, takes the topic into the realm of visual culture. She investigates the aesthetic effects of the “alien” face—or the faces of those who don’t fit into the confines of Western beauty. “One of the risks I take is considering a nonnormative face as a work of art, by thinking about the pleasures of what we normally call ‘the monstrous’ or ‘the different’ or the grotesque, but actually seeing it as sculptural—something we know we can appreciate in art. To do it to a person feels like a taboo, but I actually think people do that with everybody, and people often do it to themselves, and the connection is empowering. It’s hard to really take our kind of ethical stance on this as far as this, but body modification, that desire to turn your body into a work of art, I think should be respected and admired, rather than denigrated as a grotesque thing.”

Serpell differentiates between aesthetically connecting with the alien and “exoticizing otherness”, where questions of the aesthetic and ethical intertwine. She explains, “The problematic implication of exoticizing or making someone into an object of art is that the objectification will somehow lead to their oppression, or their negation. It’s slighting their personhood, but I actually think it’s the imbalance of who gets exoticized and who doesn’t, rather the act of exoticizing itself, that is problematic”, she explained.

In an interview with PBS, she indicated how she raises these themes in her classrooms: “All of the great literature of the US is told through the story of the outsider... being an alien is the condition of being American.” Serpell has taught American classics like *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Joy Luck Club*, and *The Color Purple*—only to name a few. She is currently teaching a “Writing and Technology” course that explores Data Science and Computer Science through a science fiction lens and technical, non-fiction books. She was particularly excited about her Black Science Fiction Course, a

genre that she wants to make known. “I’m sort of curating things that I think every student should read, whether those are the classics or things they’ve never heard of. I want students to be able to engage with these works of literature with an understanding of how their form affects their experience. That sounds very broad, but that’s the difference between a book club and a course: it’s not just about what happens, it’s about how it’s told.”

Serpell’s shortlist of reading recommendations includes her fellow Berkeley English Department colleague Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Kiese Laymon’s *Long Division*, and W.E.B Du Bois’s lesser-known short story, “The Comet”. Also recommended are works by female African contemporaries: Jennifer Makumbi’s forthcoming *A Girl is a Body of Water* and Wayetu Moore’s *She Would Be King*.

Stranger Faces, is set to be released in September of 2020. The majority of her work can be found on her [website](#).