Ages and Stages

Glimpses into the Lives of Women in the Academy

Edited by

Terry Novak

Johnson & Wales University

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Contents

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About the Contributors

Kathleen Ahrens is a Professor in the Department of English and Communication and a member of the Research Centre for Professional Communication in English at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She was Chair of the Executive Board for the Association for Researching and Applying Metaphor ('18-'22), former President of the Hong Kong Academy of the Humanities ('18-'19), and a member of the International Advisory Board for the Metaphor Lab Amsterdam. She served as the Director of the HKBU International Writers' Workshop ('12-'17), the Programme Director for International Poetry Nights Hong Kong ('13), and as Advisory Board member and International Regional Advisor Chairperson for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators ('08-'20). She is a Certified Gallup Strengths Coach. Professor Ahrens is a member of the Editorial Boards of *Lingua* (Elsevier), *Metaphor and the Social World* (Benjamins), *Journal of Pragmatics* (Elsevier) and *Lingua Sinica* (Sciendo). She is also a member of the Editorial Board for the book series *Metaphor in Language, Cognition, and Communication* (Benjamins). Professor Ahrens has recent papers in *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience, Intercultural Pragmatics, PLoS One, Journal of Pragmatics, Metaphor & Symbol*, and *Applied Linguistics,* and she has had two recent *Lingua* papers selected as Editor's Choice articles. During her research career, she has gained over US$ 1 million in competitive research funding and published extensively on issues relating to critical metaphor analysis. She takes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of metaphor, running behavioral crowd-sourcing studies, as well as analyzing metaphor use through corpus-based and ontological-based approaches.

Lee Skallerup Bessette, Assistant Director of Digital Learning at Georgetown University's Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS), earned her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta. She is a regular contributor to *Inside Higher Ed*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *ProfHacker*. Lee became interested in technology, access, and pedagogy while she was a contingent faculty member at Morehead State University in Kentucky, moved into faculty development at the University of Kentucky, and most recently joined CNDLS from the University of Mary Washington, where she worked on their Domain of One's Own program. Her book, *Terms of Service: Affective Labor and Alt-Ac Careers*, is forthcoming from University Press of Kansas.

Margie Burns has taught at several institutions and lectures part-time in English at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Her published work includes many articles and *Publishing Northanger Abbey* (2021), *Common Sense in the Second Amendment* (2020), and *The Female Precariat* (co-authored, 2019). Her current book is *Jane Austen, Abolitionist: The Loaded History of the Phrase "Pride and Prejudice"* (McFarland, 2024).

Sarah Fisher Davis studies the environmental humanities and contemporary American literature, as well as film and graphic narratives, at Stony Brook University. With graduate certificates in Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies and Writing, she focuses specifically on how the rhetoric and representation of gender, embodiment, and ecology relate to one another and to geopolitical, public health, and social justice issues. She is preparing to defend her dissertation: "Dosimetric Aesthetics: Detecting Radiation in Contemporary U.S. Film & Literature." Sarah earned her B.A. in History Education & English from Gardner-Webb University and her M.A. in English from UNC Charlotte.

Melissa Jenkins, an associate professor in the literature program at Wake Forest University, researches nineteenth-century British literature and culture as well as gender studies and the history of the book. She has authored several articles and book chapters, and has written both *Fatherhood, Authority, and British Reading Culture, 1831-1907* (Routledge 2014) and *Literary Texts and Critical Methods: Engaging Dialogue*, forthcoming from Routledge.

Nourit Melcer-Padon's research interests include comparative literature, art, and culture, focusing on the interrelationship of history and fiction. She is engaged in continuing research on social aspects of the Jewish community in seventeenth-century Livorno. She serves as chair of the English department at the The Jerusalem Multidisciplinary Academic College. She has published scholarly articles in various fields and is currently working on a book about home and immigration in the context of the Italian diaspora.

Terry Novak, a professor of English at the Providence, Rhode Island campus of Johnson & Wales University, teaches composition, literature, communication, and interdisciplinary courses. Among her scholarly interests are nineteenth-century African American women writers, learning communities, and racial and gender equity in the academy. She has published dozens of articles and presented often on these topics.

Mariana Past, Professor of Spanish at Dickinson College, researches Spanish and Francophone Caribbean literature, including issues of migration/exile, Haitian-Dominican relations, and representations of the Haitian Revolution. She has published articles in several scholarly journals. She co-edited (with Natalie Léger, CUNY Queens College) *Toussaint Louverture: Repensar un icono*

(2015) and co-translated (with Benjamin Hebblethwaite, UFL) Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (1977*) Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* [Stirring the Pot of Haitian History] from Haitian Creole to English. She has also published poetry and prose translations in *Metamorphoses*, *Transition*, and *World Literature Today*. Professor Past teaches courses that emphasize the overlapping histories and cultures of people in the Caribbean and the broader diaspora, challenging notions of cultural production in terms of national linguistic blocks.

Jeanne Marie Rose teaches courses in writing, rhetoric, and literature at Penn State University, Berks, including first-year composition, professional writing, rhetorical theory, and the short story. She holds a long-standing interest in teachers' and students' ways of using and engaging with language, literacy, and learning. Her work has explored composition pedagogy, composition and literature's disciplinary relationship, and teaching with technology. She has published in *Peitho*, *Present Tense*, *Pedagogy*, *Computers and Composition*, and other journals and book collections. Her article "Writing Time: Composing in an Accelerated World" was selected for inclusion in *The Best of the Independent Journals in Rhetoric and Composition 2012*.

Dana Shiller is a Professor in the Department of English at Washington & Jefferson College. She teaches a range of courses in nineteenth and twentieth-century British literature, including the Victorian Novel, British Modernism, British Women Writers and Contemporary British Historical Fiction. Her scholarship focuses on the uses of the past in contemporary British fiction, specifically in Neo-Victorian studies. Dr. Shiller's other teaching interests include Holocaust literature, detective fiction, environmental literature and composition.

Genesis: An Introduction

Terry Novak
Johnson & Wales University

Abstract

A framework for the *Ages and Stages* essay collection, this chapter introduces the reader to the birth of the writing project while also placing the larger themes of the text in a brief historical context.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; Judith Shakespeare; Judy Brady; Northeast Modern Language Association; women and higher education; leadership; privilege

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In the beginning, there was a woman trying to work—oh, not the work deemed traditionally fitting for the woman—not the keeping of house, the minding of children, the tending to spouse, the meeting of a myriad of societal expectations—but the work that one's very soul demands of one, the work for which any given woman—any given human being--is born. This type of work brings to mind that which Virginia Woolf's fictional Judith Shakespeare—William's sister--yearned to fulfill, with the expected tragic results (*A Room of One's Own,* Chapter 3). Woolf's Judith Shakespeare, William's "extraordinarily gifted sister…was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was" (49), but she was born female in a world that strictly delineated societal roles according to gender. Running away to pursue her dreams resulted in her tragic end. A childless and creative genius herself, the early twentieth-century Woolf imagined what seemed all too likely an end for a rebellious young woman of the sixteenth century. The work in which both the created Judith Shakespeare and the very real Virginia Woolf struggled to engage is the type of work that surely led a number of women in ages past (and perhaps still in our own age) to join convents, places of certain refuge where studying, writing, and teaching were encouraged and celebrated, sans the domestic expectations of whatever modern society in which one found herself living. This is the type of work of which Alice Walker writes in "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens," an essay in Walker's book of the same title that beautifully and poignantly clarifies the struggles and triumphs of African American women yearning to share their wisdom and creativity with a world insistent on relegating these women to the

annals of illiteracy, slavery, and brutality. When Walker writes of her mother's creative release through wondrously beautiful and carefully crafted and tended flower gardens, when Walker writes of women singing through their days and quilting through their evenings, she acknowledges the fact that important, soulful work must find a release through one medium or another.

In many ways, this also is the type of work that the ten women contributing to this volume through various places of privilege as well as various places of strife in our twenty-first-century world toil to see to fruition amidst continuing challenges. The places of privilege are as varied as are the places of strife. Some experience racial and ethnic places of privilege. Some have sprung from definite places of economic privilege, leading to distinct opportunities. Others enjoy political and/or geographical privilege. All experience the privilege of having achieved a level of education that many women, both past and present, would find enviable. Likewise, the contributors spring from various places of challenge. We readily acknowledge that for some those places of challenge could not be overcome in time to satisfy the timeline set forth for this volume. This became the work that a number equal to that of our contributors could not birth: some because of conflicting domestic duties, some because of unexpected additional tasks thrust upon them at their campuses, some because they found the personal nature of the essay assignment a more mentally and emotionally labor-intensive endeavor than they could currently afford. How some of us could use that stereotypical "wife" of which Judy Brady writes in her classic 1972 essay, "I Want a Wife": someone to take care of the mundane daily tasks so that we can simply focus on our work, uninterrupted, for long stretches at a time.

Feeling particularly frustrated with the challenges of finding a balance among competing duties and my own research and scholarship agenda desires in Spring 2018, and knowing that many other women shared like frustrations, I submitted a roundtable session proposal for the 2019 annual convention of the Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA). My proposal to offer a session (called "Stages and Ages" that first year) geared toward women in the academy who struggled with balance in the workplace specifically and in life generally struck a chord with a handful of women scholars eager to join the conversation. That tentative first session led to what has become an annual offering of the roundtable. Though NeMLA members represent international scholars and practitioners of all modern languages, our roundtable participants have fairly consistently come from English-language disciplines as well as from the United States. Readers will notice that pattern in the offerings of this volume, with some exceptions regarding geography. We roundtable participants have long recognized the need to share our stories more broadly, especially during that "pandemic convention" of 2021, when NeMLA managed

to successfully execute the entire event remotely. What rich conversation we had that Sunday morning! We generally think of 2020 as the Covid year, but the NeMLA 2020 Convention carried on as scheduled--in Boston in March 2020--with many international colleagues missing and with growing trepidation among participants as the days of the convention proceeded, shortly before news of the first Covid-19 "superspreader" in the United States, traced to a convention held at another Boston hotel in late February. We had barely returned to our homes after our convention when our lives changed dramatically. After a year of living and working under conditions which none could have imagined previously, our "Ages and Stages" roundtable session at the virtual NeMLA 2021 convention proved to be a powerful and cathartic experience, one during which we were able to share our current struggles and frustrations along with our continuing professional dilemmas in a particularly open fashion. To facilitate the sense of security necessary to such sharing, we decided against recording the virtual session. We—presenters and participants alike—have found through our open dialogue at these roundtables that, even though we live in the twenty-first century and enjoy privileges of which our foremothers were only able to dream, we have yet to achieve that level playing field which increasingly seems an overall myth. We have also found a sense of relief and empowerment in the community of women drawn together through the roundtable sessions—some at the very beginning of their graduate studies, others at the sunset years of their career in the academy; some who always knew they would strive for a life of the mind, others who continue to struggle with the imposter syndrome so indicative of certain childhood environments; some young; some at mid-life; some beyond. Through all of our discussions and work we remain ever aware of those who strove to lay an easier path long before our lifetimes. We also remain keenly aware of the struggles of those women academics whose labor in geographical regions other than our own position them in significantly more challenging situations, a quarter of the way into the twenty-first century.

The path to gender equality has not been historically easy, nor has it yet to be achieved, in spite of some significant bright spots—not even in the academy. "In 1840, Catherine Elizabeth Brewer Benson became the first woman to receive her degree from the first college in the world chartered to grant degrees to women," Wesleyan College proudly touts on its website. When the college opened as Georgia Female College in 1836, it became an important linchpin in the Female Seminary movement, as well as the first women's college in the world. It would be easy to pinpoint 1836 as the year women entered the academy, but, of course, women worldwide had found a myriad of ways to do so through male-only colleges for centuries as well as through other creative means: entering a convent and pursuing independent studies unhindered by domestic duties, for instance. (The seventeenth-century Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, from Mexico, comes readily to mind.) Even with the establishment of

women's colleges in the nineteenth-century Western world, the vast majority of gifted and talented women who would have thrived in such institutions did not find such a path viable. Higher education was overall for the economically, racially, and societally privileged. When the British Virginia Woolf writes in her 1929 *A Room of One's Own* about wandering the campus of the fictitious Oxbridge, deep in thoughts of intellectual wonder and discovery, she shares the experience of being stopped in her idealistic wanderings simply because of her gender:

> …he was Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me…The only charge I could bring against the Fellows and Scholars of whatever the college might happen to be was that in protection of their turf, which has been rolled for 300 years in succession, they had sent my little fish into hiding. (6)

Across the Atlantic Ocean, Woolf's American sisters fared no better in the halls of higher education that had been purposely created for men—specifically white men of a certain economic class and often for the purpose of training one for the ministry. Harvard University had its Radcliffe and Brown University had its Pembroke, but genuine movement toward equal education for men and women came much later than did the founding of the universities. Harvard's online historical overview claims women as having always been a part of the campus culture—as employees and as wives supportive in a variety of ways of their professor and researcher husbands. Both Drew Gilpin Faust and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich have treated the subject of women at Harvard/Radcliffe in balanced, intriguing, and entertaining fashion; their work is worth exploring. But make no mistake: Working as a cleaning woman or kitchen staff at a university or being the wife of a male professor makes a woman no closer to being a more significant part of the institution than tending to the altar linens or other tasks at a Catholic church brings her to being accepted into the seminary.

Leaping forward, it is well documented that the overall student body in twenty-first-century colleges and universities leans much more favorably toward women than toward men; the same is true of persistence and graduation rates. That trend does not, however, continue with faculty and administration. Certainly, outliers exist. There are many more women teaching first-year composition classes than there are men, for instance, as detailed in Margie Burns' chapter. On the other hand, many of the women teaching these courses are adjunct professors, making a salary that can best be described as despicable, given the years of education these professors have completed, as well as the overall years of classroom experience they have accumulated.

Women in full-time faculty positions face the same paths to promotion (and tenure, if they are fortunate enough to be at an institution that still grants tenure) as do their male colleagues, with one significant difference: By and large, domestic responsibilities still fall more heavily on the shoulders of women faculty members than they do on their male counterparts. Likewise, service obligations at our institutions tend to "favor" women over men. Neither case lends itself to the luxury of time needed to pursue meaningful research and scholarship that will, in turn, lend itself to the robust dossier needed for promotion to full professor at most institutions of higher education. (See Jeanne Marie Rose's chapter for more discussion on this topic.)

Leadership roles for women in the academy continue to lag behind those same opportunities for men, again with some telling deviations: Women are often promoted to student-centered leadership positions, with the expectation that their "natural" inclinations for nurturing and compassion can best serve the institution in these roles. (Did someone say "stereotype" again?) Interestingly, my personal experience in the landscape of higher education has strayed from this theme somewhat. In my undergraduate years at Notre Dame College of Ohio, a Catholic college for women at the time, all leadership roles (to the best of my recollection) were held by women, mostly Sisters of Notre Dame, who founded and financially sponsored the college. (This financial sponsorship ended in 2023; the college, coeducational since 2001, closed in May 2024.) The vast majority of faculty members were also women, many nuns. Such was not the case in my graduate years. Similar to my experience at Notre Dame College, though, my graduate institutions illustrated with great clarity that the most successful women in the academy were childless, as well as often single. (Of course, *all* of the nuns at Notre Dame College were single and childless.) Again, the struggle with balancing childrearing and success in the academy can be readily found in the chapters that follow, including a compelling reflection on mothering adolescents while navigating the academy, written by Dana Shiller.

The university at which I have spent the past quarter century, Johnson & Wales University, was founded by two women, Gertrude Johnson and Mary T. Wales, in 1914 (before women had the right to vote in the United States, as we are often reminded) and currently has women at the helm of some of its highest leadership positions: Chancellor, Associate Provost, Providence campus president, Vice President of Human Resources, to name a few. Certainly, this is far from the norm and was not always the case. When Ms. Johnson and Ms. Wales found it necessary to sell the school in 1947, they sold it to two men, and majority leadership by men continued for some time. Much like the Sisters of Notre Dame and their college, Ms. Johnson and Ms. Wales presented as outliers in higher education, bucking a systemic trend that continues to favor male

perspective while shortchanging the unique perspectives women bring to the academic table. Because of its unique inception, the university's history is well worth exploring. Marian Gagnon, Ph.D., retired Johnson & Wales University English professor and founder of Goodnight Irene Productions, created a wonderful series of documentaries on the history of the university. I highly recommend viewing *HERstory: The Founding Mothers*, which is readily available on YouTube. The documentary not only provides important biographical and historical information; it also masterfully illustrates the power of partnership—both professional and personal--between women. The importance of such professional partnership and community among women in the academy comes to light throughout the discussions in this volume, underscoring the recognition of such community building as inherently critical to bringing equity to fruition.

One of the significant disclaimers that occurs throughout this collection of essays is that of writing from a place of privilege, as do all of the contributors to this essay to some degree, as noted earlier in this chapter. Mariana Past perhaps illustrates this most clearly in her discussion. It is important to remember, though, the degrees of privilege. Melissa Jenkins reminds the reader of this in a significant way. It is also important to point out that some of our contributors are writing from a place and time of remarkable difficulty. We see this in Sarah Fisher Davis's compelling discourse on the experience of early motherhood. We also see this, in a vastly different way, in Nourit Melcer-Padon's beautifully reflective essay written in the midst of war.

We offer this volume of essays as something atypical in the academic world: as a hybrid collection of essays meant to be read in conversation with one another. Many of the essays include references and research; some do not. Lee Skallerup Bessette contributes a distinctly personal discussion in her chapter, as it is my hope that I do as well. Kathleen Ahrens generously provides a career map for young academics. All contributors grace us with a mixture of the personal and the academic in one fashion or another. This has been a true collaboration. All contributors participated in one or another of the NeMLA "Ages and Stages" roundtable discussions. All have had access to each other's draft chapters and have been generous with their time in both reading the essays and providing feedback. And all have fought the balance demons while striving to meet deadlines. In our sisterhood, we wish you a good read.

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Index

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V

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