Chapter 10

Feminist Scholar/Activist, Teacher, Mentor, Colleague, Friend

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Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres has long been one of the leading feminist scholars in German studies (and beyond), and she has mentored generations of students who have become feminist scholars in our field all over the United States and Canada. But she has also mentored her colleagues: I know, because I am one of them. For over thirty years, she has been a mentor, an ally, and a friend. She empowered the evolution of my scholarship in a feminist direction. She also shaped my department and the field of German studies by her leadership in the hiring of colleagues like Arlene Teraoka and Leslie Morris.

In what follows, I will describe how Ruth-Ellen's influence on my career and my department parallels her influence on the field of

German feminist studies in general. In doing so, in line both with feminism and Ruth-Ellen's own example, I will mix the personal, the professional, and the political.

I met Ruth-Ellen at the 1985 conference of the Coalition of Women in German (WiG) in Portland, Oregon, organized by Dinah Dodds at Lewis and Clark College. It was my first WiG conference; I was part of a group of graduate students from the German Department at the University of California at Berkeley who rented a car and drove all day long from Northern California to Portland; we were transporting the conference's guest scholar, Luise Pusch, the renowned feminist linguist from West Germany who had just given a talk at Berkeley. The WiG conference paid for the rental car and the gas.

Within a few months, I encountered Ruth-Ellen again. We met at the Modern Language Association (MLA) conference in Chicago in December 1985, my first MLA, and the first time I went on the job market (with barely a chapter of my dissertation written). I saw her at a reception, and I went up and spoke to her; she remembered me and was friendly. This of course was not necessarily what one expected as a graduate student dealing with a senior scholar (this was around the time Ruth-Ellen was promoted to full professor, I believe), but she defied such conventional stereotypes. She was both friendly and encouraging. Little did we know that within two years we would be colleagues.

For that is what happened: at the MLA in New York in December 1986, I had an interview for a job at the University of Minnesota—my dissertation was now finished, I was in a visiting position at New York University, and I had four other interviews. The only campus interview I got was in Minnesota—and much to my surprise, I was offered the job soon after returning to New York. In September 1987 I arrived in Minnesota. The chair of the department at that time was Gerhard Weiss, a pioneer in German studies whose example as a chair and colleague set a humane tone that characterizes my department to this day.

Ruth-Ellen had been in the department since 1976. She loves to tell the anecdote about the job talk she gave on her campus visit: she was discussing a Goethe play from the 1770s that was meant to be sung, *Das Jahrmarktfest zu Plundersweilern,* and at a certain point she actually sang an excerpt from the play. This performance earned her enthusiastic applause from her future colleagues, and Gerhard Weiss was so enamored by it that for years he always mentioned it whenever he spoke to anyone about Ruth-Ellen.

Not too long after I joined the department in 1987, our DAAD Visiting Professor, Heidrun Suhr, invited my spouse Joan Clarkson and me to a dinner party at her apartment across from the Walker Art Center, and Ruth-Ellen and her friend Pamela Mittlefehldt were there. This was the beginning of an alliance that would become a close friendship. Ruth-Ellen and I became allies because at the time we were the only two people in the department who had much interest in feminism. At this point, of course, all I had written was a dissertation that covered some West German novels and films, some of which I considered feminist, whereas Ruth-Ellen was already one of the leading feminist scholars in German studies in North America and Germany.[1] She was also a feminist activist on the campus of the University of Minnesota, involved with both the Department of Women's Studies and the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies (CAFS). CAFS ran an interdisciplinary graduate program, and Ruth-Ellen had served as its director. She encouraged me to get involved in CAFS and to continue my involvement in WiG.

In this way she also served as a model of interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching, as someone who divided her work between the German department and women's studies and CAFS. Indeed, both she and the other prominent member of the "middle" generation of scholars in our department at that time, Jochen Schulte-Sasse, were models of interdisciplinarity in this way to all of us who came later—Jochen with his work in comparative literature and in cultural theory, Ruth-Ellen with her work in women's studies and in feminist theory—and activism. In this sense, they both anticipated the much more broadly interdisciplinary version of German studies that has developed since the 1990s.

Obviously, as a mentor and role model, Ruth-Ellen helped me tremendously. But how could I help her? Well, again, as an ally in the department. In my second year, the German department had a search to hire a full or associate professor. I was selected to be on the search committee; Ruth-Ellen was its chair. We went to the MLA in New Orleans in December 1988. Our goal? To make sure we hired a woman. At that point we were a department of eight men and two women, and the other woman in the department was neither a feminist nor an ally of Ruth-Ellen.

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1 For insight into Ruth-Ellen's career before she was such a confident feminist, see Shawn Jarvis's chapter in this volume.

At the MLA we interviewed many qualified women scholars. Obviously, there were male applicants as well, and one of them was a major scholar in German studies and comparative literature, and it would have been a major coup for Minnesota to get him. He was irresistible to the search committee and the whole department. What to do? Well, Ruth-Ellen decided to be bold and went to the Dean and asked for two hires, given the quality of the pool. This was an even bigger coup for our department, which certainly helped put us *on the map* in German studies: we hired Jack Zipes, whose work on fairy tales was informed by feminism as well as Marxism, and Arlene Teraoka, who was doing ground-breaking work in a number of areas, including the field of minority literatures in German; indeed, she was examining the position of Turkish German writers. Arlene's work not only expanded the scope of the kind of German studies our department did but pushed the boundaries of German studies throughout the US.

Obviously, for a feminist like Ruth-Ellen, the personal is intertwined with the political—and the professional—which brings me to the 1989 WiG conference in Minnesota. It took place at a convent—I kid you not—on Lake Pepin, which is a vast widening of the Mississippi river between the high bluffs of southeastern Minnesota and western Wisconsin. There was no guest scholar or artist that year, and this was by design. The idea was that WiG would use that conference to take stock of where its members were and where the collective was as a whole. There was a session Ruth-Ellen organized at which different members representing different constituencies spoke about their relationship to WiG. She recruited members to speak, and I was one of them.

As almost the only man at the conference, I opened with a joke that played on the fact that I was (am) bald (and had been since my 20s), saying that I was probably the only one there at WiG who actually needed a wig. Then I went on to talk about the influence of my mother's feminism. Another major presence at WiG then (and now), Sara Lennox from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, wanted Leslie Morris, then a graduate student in Sara's department, to speak, because Leslie was both lesbian and Jewish. Even back then WiG was trying to focus on intersectionality. Leslie spoke, I spoke, and some others spoke.

And then Ruth-Ellen spoke. She took that opportunity to come out as a lesbian to the whole group. As you might imagine, this was moving and cathartic; indeed, it inspired others to share their stories. Coming out was more difficult in the Reagan-Bush era than it would be later. Some of us knew already what Ruth-Ellen had disclosed, of course, but

the fact that she used the WiG conference to make it public was a manifestation of how she felt about the feminist collective that was—that is—WiG.

In 1990, in what was a major coup, Ruth-Ellen and Barbara Laslett from Sociology brought the feminist journal *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* to Minnesota; they would co-edit the journal here for five years. They recruited several younger scholars to serve on the editorial board, and I was one of them, thanks to Ruth-Ellen. Reading manuscripts for articles submitted for consideration at such an interdisciplinary feminist journal and then debating their merits with a feisty bunch of feminist scholars on the editorial board was a formative experience for me.

But back to intersectionality: While Ruth-Ellen was co-editing the journal she became very enthusiastic about an essay that appeared in 1994, "Purity, Impurity, and Separation" by Maria Lugones, in which the author, related her concern with "enmeshed oppressions," and developed the concept of "curdling." Ruth-Ellen had all of us, all her friends and students, read this essay, which championed multiplicity over unity, the "impure" over the "pure," and *mestizaje* over homogeneity. She would organize meetings at her house with graduate students and colleagues to discuss issues like this. Indeed, she also organized meetings of her (many) advisees at her house to discuss their progress on their dissertations, creating a convention that would ultimately be formalized in the department as the dissertation seminar.

When she wasn't mentoring her many PhD students and helping to re-shape the department, German studies, and feminist studies, Ruth-Ellen was also mentoring me. She taught me to assert myself as a faculty member—indeed, she said to me: "Remember, you are faculty." Those of us who are or have been faculty know that there are times when each of us feels like a fraud, especially (but not only) early in our careers; she taught me to *own* my status instead. She advised me not merely to submit when more senior colleagues in the department asserted themselves on various issues. Ruth-Ellen was a wise and generous mentor—teaching not only women colleagues to stand up for themselves, but even nerdy guys like me. She supported me when I went up for tenure and later when I was promoted to full professor.

She also befriended Joan and me, and she has remained our dear friend to this day. She hosted parties at her house every four years where friends got together to watch election returns—which ended not very happily in 1988, but better in 1992. Besides politics, Joan and I had more

in common with Ruth-Ellen—another bond we shared was adoption. She had adopted her two children, Timothy and Melissa, in the 1970s; we adopted our two children, Isa and Susana in the 1990s. Every year, Ruth-Ellen would come to our house just before or after Christmas, bringing presents for our kids when they were little. I would build a fire in the fireplace, and we would have tea and short-bread cookies. Each year we gave Ruth-Ellen the Syracuse Cultural Workers' Peace Calendar for the New Year (and we still do).

In the late 1990s our department conducted another major search, and once again Ruth-Ellen and I were allies in our attempt to hire more women. This time we had two positions, and we ended up hiring two women. One of them was an excellent scholar we eventually lost to another university, but the one who has stayed to this day was another scholar who transformed not just our department but the field of German studies: Leslie Morris, whose work in German Jewish studies complemented what Jack Zipes was doing in that area. Leslie would ensure that it became a specialization that would distinguish our department to this day. Her work not only transformed German studies but helped to shape the emerging field of German Jewish studies as well.

It was around this time too that Ruth-Ellen's book *Respectability and Deviance: Nineteenth-Century Women and the Ambiguity of Representation* (1998) was released, a masterful work that was the culmination of the exhaustive scholarship—research and analysis—she had done on nineteenth-century German women writers, demonstrating the expertise in that field that she had developed over her career. She was honored for this book on campus—being recognized as a Scholar of the College in the College of Liberal Arts in 1999. Five years later, she received a university-wide honor, the Ada Comstock Distinguished Women's Scholars Award.

Ruth-Ellen's work on nineteenth-century German women writers has created an impressive scholarly legacy that cannot be ignored. Much of her work included interdisciplinary feminist collaboration, such as the 1986 book she co-edited with University of Minnesota historian Mary Jo Maynes, *German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: A Social and Literary History.* Her work on personal narratives and the essay must also be mentioned: *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (1989), a book that was the collective product of the Personal Narratives Group, composed of a number of feminist scholars at the University of Minnesota; *Revising the Word and the World: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism* (1993),

which she co-edited with VèVè A. Clark and Madelon Sprengnether; and *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives* (1993), co-edited with Elizabeth (Liz) Mittman.[2]

Ruth-Ellen's scholarly legacy also includes the many scholars and teachers whose dissertations she advised. Some of them went on to become experts themselves in German literature of the late eighteenth, nineteenth century, and early twentieth century, but many wrote dissertations on topics far beyond that range. Many of the leading scholars in the field of feminist German studies were advised and mentored by Ruth-Ellen.[3]

In the great amount of service and leadership Ruth-Ellen has provided the profession, much has been as an editor—co-editing *Signs*, as mentioned above, but also co-editing the *Women in German Yearbook* (2002–2004), which is now called *Feminist German Studies*. And in doing such editorial work, she developed an allergy to obscure academic/theoretical jargon in scholarly writing.[4] Her campaign on this front led ultimately to the book she co-edited with Angelika Bammer, *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions* (2015). Ruth-Ellen retired in 2013, but she is still motivated by an intense interest in questions about how one writes: how should one write as a scholar and as a human being, how should one mix the personal with the scholarly, how should one write a personal narrative or a memoir?

On the personal front, the untimely death of Ruth-Ellen's son Timothy in Guatemala in 2010 was a loss that caused Ruth-Ellen great grief, the kind of loss from which a parent can never fully recover. But she remains close to her daughter Melissa and to Melissa's children Ashley and Brittany. And Ashley's daughter, Ruth-Ellen's great granddaughter, the amazing Victoria, brings her so much joy.

Ruth-Ellen no longer organizes election parties every four years, but that tradition has been continued by our colleague Leslie Morris and her wife Shevvy Craig (a professor in our English department). Nonetheless, Ruth-Ellen remains as politically engaged as ever, as many

2 For an extensive list of her work, see the bibliography of Ruth-Ellen's publications in the appendices of this volume.

3 See the bibliography of dissertations advised by Ruth-Ellen in the appendices of this volume.

4 For more detail on the boldness of Ruth-Ellen's campaign against academic jargon—and the controversy it engendered—see Shawn Jarvis's chapter in this volume. The joint contribution by Angelika Bammer and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres in this volume also delves further into the topic of academic writing.

of her friends can testify, those of us who get her frequent, urgent emails with petitions to sign and links to articles in many newspapers, journals, and blogs (*The New York Times, Washington Post, The New Yorker, The London Review of Books,* etc., etc.).

She is a dear friend to many across North America and in Europe (Boston, Sacramento, Arizona, Germany, England, Slovenia). Those not near receive her emails, and those in the Twin Cities area meet her for lunch—lovely, long lunches filled with conversation on so many topics, personal, professional, and political. How many wonderful lunches have I enjoyed with Ruth-Ellen at various cafes: at Cupcake, at T-Rex, at Nina's. Together we also would visit our dear colleague, Gerhard Weiss, before he passed away in October 2019 at 93. How we miss him. And Ruth-Ellen remains a generous mentor, willing to read the introduction to my Lubitsch manuscript and offer feedback and encouragement.

On October 10, 2019, there was an op-ed by Ruth Whippman in the *New York Times* titled "Enough Leaning In. Let's Tell Men to Lean Out." Whippman argued that instead of women being encouraged to "lean in" and become more like men—indeed, like aggressive, "alpha males"—men should be encouraged to "lean out" and become more like women—nurturing and collaborative. As a man who has long been inspired by feminism, I can say that this message resonated with me; the idea that women should become more like men—if that meant being more like the aggressive, arrogant jerks who have done the most damage in the history of our planet—never appealed to me.

Obviously, it is a mixture of traits stereotypically gendered as feminine or masculine that are needed in any human being who aspires to doing good work in the world. Scholar, teacher, activist, feminist pioneer, mentor, ally, friend—all of this is combined in Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres. An example to so many, an example to me.

Works Cited

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