Chapter 8

Autogynographically Speaking

Autogynographically Speaking: A Dialogue on Feminist Friendship

Elizabeth Mittman
Michigan State University

Lisa Roetzel
University of California, Irvine

Liz Mittman is Associate Professor of German Studies at Michigan State University, where she teaches East German and postsocialist studies, visual culture, life writing, memory cultures, and gender studies. She has published articles and review essays in *Signs*, *Seminar*, *Monatshefte*, *German Politics and Society*, the *Women in German Yearbook*, *Transit*, and *Foreign Language Annals*. Since her introduction to the Coalition of Women in German (WiG) during graduate school by Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, WiG has played a central role for her both personally and professionally, from involvement on the Editorial Board of the *Women in German Yearbook* (now *Feminist German Studies*) to organizing and hosting the WiG annual national conference, 2009–2011.

Lisa Roetzel is Director of the University of California, Irvine's (UCI) Campuswide Honors Collegium, a four-year undergraduate honors college. She oversees the academics, community, and support that assist UCI's diverse honors students in achieving their goals and is committed to the transformative development of the whole student. She previously held positions as Director of Development at UCI, and as

Associate Professor of German at the Eastman School of Music. Foundational to her career in higher education have been her doctoral studies in German at the University of Minnesota and the feminist teachings and encouragement of professors and peers.

LizandLisa

We are speaking with one another over thousands of miles, from opposite corners of the US. We immediately recognize each other's voice, and despite our significant geographical and temporal displacement, we easily lapse into a familiar exchange. We have known each other for what seems like an unbelievably long time, and our lives have taken their own, separate paths. However, once we connect, our conversations are buoyed by an undercurrent of shared history; I know you and you me, we GET each other.

Our shared history began as graduate students in the University of Minnesota's Department of German during the 1980s. There we experienced a graduate education that was extraordinary in many ways, during a time when many tenets of literary study were being challenged: the growth and development of women's studies within German studies was giving rise to a questioning of the canon and inclusion of previously ignored writers and genres, and to the development of feminist approaches to teaching, literary analysis, and literary theory, to name a few. We were led, taught, and mentored through this exciting time by Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres—an experience that was ultimately transformative.

We have so little opportunity in our busy lives to hold things in our hands and examine them closely. It is a privilege to be able to contribute to this project, and to pause and look back at our formative years and the interconnections that have been woven since through the influence of Ruth-Ellen. As graduate students we were colleagues: we took classes and engaged with a wonderful group of fellow graduate students, we studied together, collaborated, competed, and supported one another. We were close friends, then roommates, with the disarmingly similar names of Liz/Lisa, who diverged in our areas of specialization as budding scholars, and spurred each other on as we wrote our

dissertations, receiving our PhDs in the same year. We both now have careers—one as a professor of German studies, the other in academic administration—with families, children, activities, and causes that we care deeply about. We are both busy, so much so that our phone calls, like the rest of our lives, have to be scheduled.

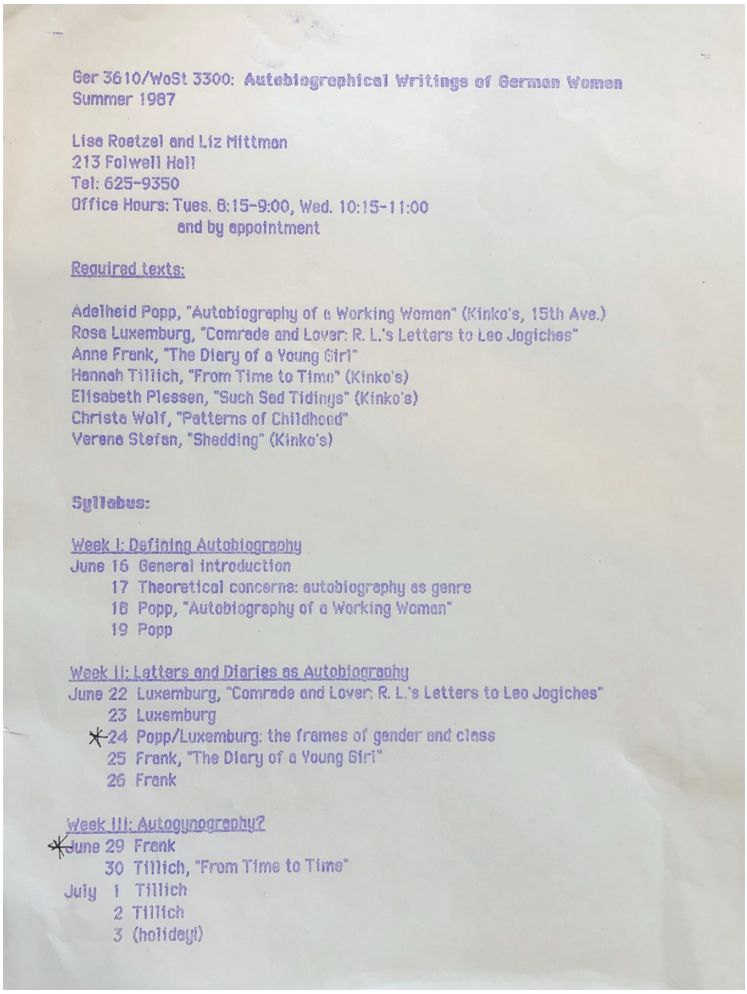
We wanted to begin this conversation in a way that is autobiographical—and as all autobiography is relational, our story is doubly so. In what follows, we will take turns diving down the rabbit hole of our shared memories and see what we find in the process. And since memory is always a co-creation of the present tense in which it is being re-called, our reflections will inevitably touch on those layers of living and thinking, working and creating, that have filled the gap since those days in Folwell Hall. LizandLisa. In many ways, lives lived in parallel, from grad school until today.…

On Collaborative Teaching: Getting the Keys to the Car

LISA: Now that I look back on it, I realize that our graduate school experience was in many ways what today we would call student-centered, where collaboration was encouraged and valued. I recently rediscovered in some old files our syllabus from the summer of 1987 when, as graduate students, we were asked by Ruth-Ellen to co-teach a course for undergraduates entitled "Autobiographical Writings of German Women" (Fig. 8.1). While we both had extensive language teaching experience as teaching assistants, I think for both of us this was our first experience teaching a literature course. It was kind of like being handed the keys to the car for the first time. I was both excited and nervous about teaching this course, wanting to live up to the trust that Ruth-Ellen had placed in us, but the fact that we were teaching it together ultimately made the experience a very positive one.

I remember hot summer days in Folwell Hall, a brick and marble edifice built in the early twentieth century, its tall casement windows flung wide open to let in a breeze, as we traded off teaching the various texts. We made it interactive, as we had been taught to do, structured the class to encourage participation and engagement, and gave our undergraduate students contextual framework and critical tools for the analysis of German women's self-life-writing. In retrospect, the scope was highly ambitious for a five-week

summer course for non-majors—authors ranging from Adelheid Popp and Rosa Luxemburg to Christa Wolf and Verena Stefan—and texts were looked at through the lenses of genre, gender, identities, class, historical context, and writing the body.



Ger 3610/WoSt 3300: **Autobiographical Writings of German Women**
Summer 1987

Lise Roetzel and Liz Mittman
213 Folwell Hall
Tel: 625-9350
Office Hours: Tues. 8:15-9:00, Wed. 10:15-11:00
and by appointment

Required texts:

Adelheid Popp, "Autobiography of a Working Woman" (Kinko's, 15th Ave.)
Rosa Luxemburg, "Comrade and Lover: R. L.'s Letters to Leo Jogiches"
Anne Frank, "The Diary of a Young Girl"
Hannah Tillich, "From Time to Time" (Kinko's)
Elisabeth Plessen, "Such Sad Tidings" (Kinko's)
Christa Wolf, "Patterns of Childhood"
Verena Stefan, "Shedding" (Kinko's)

Syllabus:

Week I: Defining Autobiography
June 16 General introduction
17 Theoretical concerns: autobiography as genre
18 Popp, "Autobiography of a Working Woman"
19 Popp

Week II: Letters and Diaries as Autobiography
June 22 Luxemburg, "Comrade and Lover: R. L.'s Letters to Leo Jogiches"
23 Luxemburg
24 Popp/Luxemburg: the frames of gender and class
25 Frank, "The Diary of a Young Girl"
26 Frank

Week III: Autogynography?
June 29 Frank
30 Tillich, "From Time to Time"
July 1 Tillich
2 Tillich
3 (holiday!)

FIGURE 8.1

I remember that the course unfolded as we taught it. While we had collaborated previously as students, co-teaching was a whole different matter. We planned each class with great care, brainstorming, discussing, and coming up with approaches, topics, and responsibilities for each class session. But what ultimately made this

experience so satisfying was both our collaboration and the playful, experimental approach we brought to the course. I think it is easy to become bound by the seriousness of the academic enterprise, and in retrospect I am proud that we seized the opportunity with delight and had a great deal of fun inventing each class session. By the time we taught this course, each of us had become interested in different aspects of German studies—from eighteenth-century literature to contemporary East German writing—and brought that diversity to play in the classroom. Teaching this course well ultimately meant trusting one another completely, both as teaching *colleagues* and as friends, as well as allowing ourselves to be vulnerable as we planned and taught the course.

LIZ: Sometimes I think we thought more freely, grandly, openly, because of those high ceilings and tall windows in Folwell Hall, letting in so much light (*mehr Licht!*). I think we had a sense of invention, of newness, of possibility. Not just because we were young and new ourselves, but precisely because of the newness of what we were doing: just a few years earlier, in our own undergraduate experiences, we hadn't (at least I hadn't!) been given the chance to (re)frame literary studies around women's voices, much less personal narratives. Letters and diaries were not genres traditionally considered appropriate fodder for literary analysis. The letters of a political philosopher and revolutionary, or the memoir of a socialist activist and journalist—these texts fell outside the parameters of the canon on multiple levels. Your recollections of crafting an open—some might say feminist—pedagogy felt completely consonant, even necessary, with the nontraditional course content. For me, beyond the emphasis on student-centered teaching lay something equally important: my (our) own path of discovery and self-discovery. Passionate engagement in scholarship can take a lot of different forms—it doesn't have to be overtly personal by any means, but in the specific context of teaching and learning about autobiography, the connections are hard to avoid, and from that course in a sultry Minnesota summer more than thirty years ago until today, the idea of autobiography has informed much of my own teaching and research.

LISA: I completely agree that this experience offered us as instructors a learning experience that was profound in its implications for our

own development, not only as feminist scholars but also as a way to engage in feminist practice as teachers. Of course, this had been modeled for us by Ruth-Ellen and other mentors, but it is one thing to have it brought to you as a student and another to experience it in your bones as you teach it.

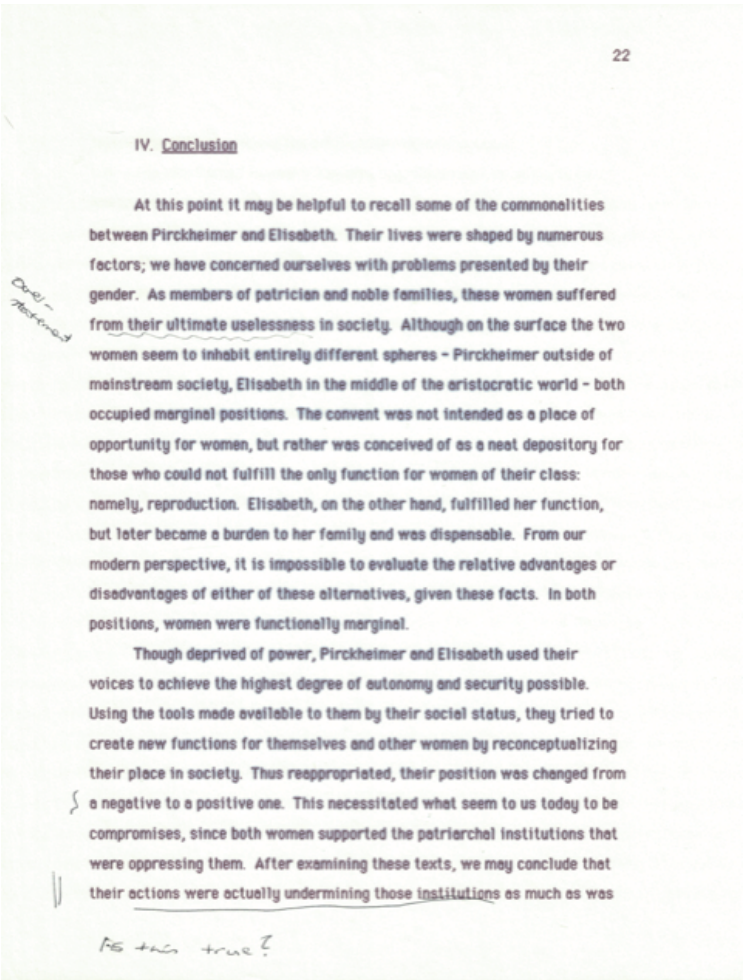
LIZ: Teaching is magical that way, isn't it? To teach well, we continually have to open ourselves up to our own learning, to memories of sitting in those students' chairs, to the joy and terror of discovery—knowledge and ignorance residing so closely side by side.

On Collaborative Writing: Finding Voices

LIZ: A year before that summer class, and four years into our friendship, we co-wrote a paper for a history seminar taught by Annette Kuhn, a visiting scholar from Germany. Our paper carried the lofty title: "Self-Preservation as Political Action: The Ambivalence of the Reformation for Aristocratic Women." We attempted a case study of the lives of Caritas Pirckheimer and Elisabeth von Braunschweig-Lüneburg based on their published letters. Pirckheimer was abbess of a convent in Nürnberg; Elisabeth was a Lutheran convert who ruled Braunschweig-Lüneburg for five years after her husband died and until her son came of age. I think we found the topic fascinating in a remote sort of way—these women were an exotic find, startling to us in their possession of audible female voices in the early sixteenth century, and in some strange sense worthy of a blend of both pity and admiration. In the paper we claimed that "… Pirckheimer and Elisabeth used their voices to achieve the highest degree of autonomy and security possible…. both women supported the patriarchal institutions that were oppressing them. After examining these texts, we may conclude that their actions were actually undermining those institutions as much as was possible within their specific social and historical contexts" (Fig. 8.2). The professor questioned our somewhat sweeping conclusion but was still generous enough to give us an A on the paper. I love that we trusted each other enough to write this paper collaboratively. There was a kind of vulnerability in linking our fates (for a grade—small-bore but still!), yet also a solidarity.

What do you remember about the class and that writing pro-

ject? Does anything about the topic of that paper, or the process of working on it together, resonate for you today, either in your own (re)construction of that earlier chapter of your life story or in more recent contexts?



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IV. Conclusion

At this point it may be helpful to recall some of the commonalities between Pirckheimer and Elisabeth. Their lives were shaped by numerous factors; we have concerned ourselves with problems presented by their gender. As members of patrician and noble families, these women suffered from their ultimate uselessness in society. Although on the surface the two women seem to inhabit entirely different spheres - Pirckheimer outside of mainstream society, Elisabeth in the middle of the aristocratic world - both occupied marginal positions. The convent was not intended as a place of opportunity for women, but rather was conceived of as a neat depository for those who could not fulfill the only function for women of their class: namely, reproduction. Elisabeth, on the other hand, fulfilled her function, but later became a burden to her family and was dispensable. From our modern perspective, it is impossible to evaluate the relative advantages or disadvantages of either of these alternatives, given these facts. In both positions, women were functionally marginal.

Though deprived of power, Pirckheimer and Elisabeth used their voices to achieve the highest degree of autonomy and security possible. Using the tools made available to them by their social status, they tried to create new functions for themselves and other women by reconceptualizing their place in society. Thus reappropriated, their position was changed from a negative to a positive one. This necessitated what seem to us today to be compromises, since both women supported the patriarchal institutions that were oppressing them. After examining these texts, we may conclude that their actions were actually undermining those institutions as much as was

Is this true?

FIGURE 8.2

LISA: I remember really liking the project, because it meshed with my interests at the time in discovering "undiscovered" women writers. Of course, since the correspondence had been published, the lack of discovery was really my own, but as a graduate student I was

fascinated by the efforts of historians to explore the lives of everyday people, and in particular the lives of women. I think now in retrospect that we might have been a little dualistic when we made our conclusion—I suspect that there was more complexity in those texts than we saw at the time.

As for the question of how this resonates with me—there are a couple of things. You talk about female voices and women's agency, and for me as a young woman, that was what feminism was all about. My *awakening* was so typical for a middle-class American teen—it was through watching TV in the 1970s and seeing women protesting and hearing about the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment. I found a lot of support from family and friends to go to graduate school in German, but I somehow hadn't put together the fact that women's studies and feminism would be something I could study at the university. It now seems so naive and shows you how little I knew about women's studies in *Germanistik*.

LIZ: I'm actually in awe of you—that you already had some sort of feminist awareness as a teenager. My own awakening to the importance of gender in my own life came much later. In fact, I can pinpoint that recognition directly to seminars with Ruth-Ellen in my first two years of graduate school! From a Proseminar on the diary as literary genre in my first year (which in retrospect felt like a sidling up to questions of gender via genre, subtly bringing it into view), to a second-year course on twentieth-century women writers—these lives, these stories (and our discussions about them) changed *my* life.

So, by the time we wrote that history paper, several years into grad school, thinking about gender had become central to my self-conception and to my studies. But as a student, my experiences of living on the inside of institutions were still very thin; categorical statements flowed easily from my pen. Looking back at this student project from the vantage point of more than two decades of professional life, I find myself wondering: what is really different for us today? In what respects are *you and I* worthy of either pity or admiration? I often feel I have fallen short of my own intellectual and moral potential, of a certain internal charge to make the world a better place. As I look back over those pages—and I honestly can't even remember with certainty which part I wrote—it strikes me that both of us lead lives that, one could argue, support the

patriarchal institutions that oppress *us*. Of course, I also have greater appreciation today for just how challenging it is to critique from within, to find practical paths of resistance. Living and working within the modern university still feels very much like a battle for self within a framework that simultaneously supports my gendered existence and would prefer to ignore it. In saying this, I am not lobbing a specific critique at my own place of employment—though my university has come under intense scrutiny for its complicity in criminal sexual conduct in the past few years. Scandals aside, I am fairly certain that similar dynamics would follow me wherever I worked in higher education. And simply to describe the imperfect institution as *patriarchal* is itself of limited utility in describing structures of oppression—in my local context, it was a female university president and provost (both now former, it must be noted) who tolerated, even enabled, the long-term abuse of dozens of girls and women by a sports doctor. As Foucault told us, institutional power runs through complex networks that make it hard for people in visible places to find the courage to stand up, much less rebel.

Not many of us are prepared to live in a state of radical *Konsequenz*, to burn down the structures within which we have been educated, nurtured, shaped (do you hear Audre Lorde here? the master's tools, etc.), and I often wonder whether I have been too timid in my own actions. In the classroom, I often feel strong, empowered to use my voice for various kinds of messages. But in the university more broadly, I often stumble, act (or not), speak (or not), out of—if not exactly conscious fear, then delicate self-preservation. I don't want to *worry* the balance, challenge the status quo too loudly or glaringly. I feel vulnerable, and it is difficult to sort out which portions of that vulnerability have to do with gender, with family status, with professional achievement.

LISA: This is thought-provoking, but I feel that you are being hard on yourself in this passage for 'falling short' or not being *konsequent*. Yes, of course, even as higher education tries to address equity and diversity, there is still a long way to go. Nevertheless, as imperfect as the efforts are, I think that colleges and universities are important spaces where these conversations are taking place, and I firmly believe that we who teach, mentor, and support students are

part of the solution.[1] Both of us work for public universities that serve students who need to hear from us. And this is one place where our engagement as feminists is particularly important. Just as our professors at Minnesota opened up new ways of thinking for us, you are now doing so for today's students. I think of the published collaboration with a graduate student that you shared with me as a fantastic example of the impact that your teaching and research (your voice!) has had on another person (Mittman and Santos). What we do opens up new ideas and ways of thinking for students—it also models for them examples of other voices and tools to deal with inequality and institutionalized discrimination.

On Community, Competition, and Friendship: Wigging Out

LIZ: If we are going to talk about diversity and inclusion and new ways of thinking, we need to talk about that crucial place where we heard and learned about other voices, a place that was both inside and outside the academy at the same time—WiG! Coupled with the crucial mentorship of a few key individuals, the Coalition of Women in German (WiG) was surely the most powerful positive force I experienced in the context of my graduate studies. Which means: in the process of becoming an adult human being.

LISA: Yes! WiG was where I got to experience feminism in action. Attending WiG conferences opened my eyes to some of the most amazing women I had ever met—from the senior founders of the coalition down to graduate students like myself—a collaborative feminist process, and a forum for speaking the truth. I felt so supported there.

LIZ: That's a powerful combination of ideas to put in one place: speaking truth *and* feeling supported. The conversations were not

1 During the final editing stages of our dialogue, the murder of George Floyd set our hometown of Minneapolis on fire, and we watched as protesters not only there but around the world reminded us of the stakes of these conversations for real people's lives, and of the importance that they be grounded, always, in a reckoning with the systemic nature of all forms of oppression.

always easy—I can remember conferences filled with conflict and visible emotions around tough topics—but the fact that this was a community of choice, organized around a principle of *making the academy a more livable place for women,* made it powerful in unique ways. I so vividly remember going on the job market and walking through the conference hotels at the MLA. In particular, I remember noticing many male peers scuttling around, looking terrified and alone. I felt that same vulnerability, to be sure, but I didn't feel as *alone* as they looked. I remember once spotting Jeanette Clausen sitting in a hotel lobby in San Francisco, when I was headed to an interview, and asking her for last-minute advice. She paused for a moment, gazing out across the sea of suits, and then looked me in the eye and said, with a wise smile, "tell the truth!" Later at that same conference, I communed with several other job-hunting "WiGlets" (as we grad student WiGgies were called back then) in the hotel sauna, where we compared notes on job interviews, many of them with the same departments. I can't imagine a better antidote to the isolation of competition in a lean job market than shared laughter and sauna sweat.

What are your strongest WiG memories? Can you identify specific moments in your WiG experience that were most crucial for your own development, or your own well-being? As a woman, as a student, as a human being?

LISA: That kind of one-on-one attention generously given by the senior members of WiG to those of us who were just starting out in the field as graduate students was so powerful. As a student I felt HEARD, acknowledged. When someone would ask "what are you working on?" it wasn't just polite chit-chat, but an opening for an honest conversation. I gave some of my first conference papers at WiG, and despite the trepidation of standing in front of all those people I admired, I knew that my work would be respected. Unlike other national conference situations (like the MLA), the audience wasn't there to poke holes in my argument or take me down. There was critique of course, but it was done in a spirit of helping one enhance one's work or taking it to the next level.

LIZ: Closer to home, that same professional competition was an unavoidable element in the dynamic between the two of us. I marvel at times that our friendship survived—even thrived—so

well under those pressures. I am convinced that the trust that had been built through all those experiences of collaboration, in teaching together, writing together, and helping to stage three WiG conferences together, created the foundation for that solidarity (and with this, I mean not just *solidarity in suffering* as students under the pressure of our professors' expectations, or of academia's more sweeping demands). Do you remember the 1989 conference at Villa Maria, where—at Ruth-Ellen's prompting, it must be noted—we took a break from the usually scheduled special guest artist or writer to make room for an extended, open conversation on competition? Ruth-Ellen and Evelyn Beck co-moderated what became a wide-ranging, boundary-busting exchange across ranks, generations, and institutions, on the complexities of being feminist in a world where competition is generated by "issues of power, space, and scarcity" (Joeres 20)."[2] I remember the entire space, filled with nearly 100 women (and a few men) vibrating with the tension of an uncomfortable conversation about conflict, but also bringing the oxygen of open dialogue for understanding and potentially changing our own responses and interactions to an issue baked so deep into our society, and in academia especially. I found it genuinely empowering to hear fellow students and feminist mentors discuss "the phenomenon of shame" (20) and critique the "dualistic thinking of 'If I am not a winner, I am a loser'" (20).

Beyond dispelling the myth that all feminists get along, it was especially helpful for me to realize, in thinking about my friendship with you, that we need above all to face the dilemma rather than avoid it, and to link arms in the ongoing battle against the "self-hate present in all women, the burden of history on our shoulders" (21). These larger, community-based conversations gave us (or me, at least) the tools, during those last two years of grad school when we were not just friends but roommates, to navigate the dissertation fellowship competition (neither of us got it) and the job hunt process (we interviewed at some of the same places, and you ultimately were offered a position at an institution where we had, somewhat surreally, both been on-campus finalists).

2 All quotes in this and the following paragraph are taken from the conference report submitted by Ruth-Ellen B[oetcher] Joeres.

I've been browsing through those old issues of the *WiG Newsletter* from its Minnesota-based years,[3] and you know what brings me the greatest joy to find spread across its pages? Your drawings and cartoons! They remind me of that playful, joyful, life-giving space we found in WiG and re-created in our own ways there.

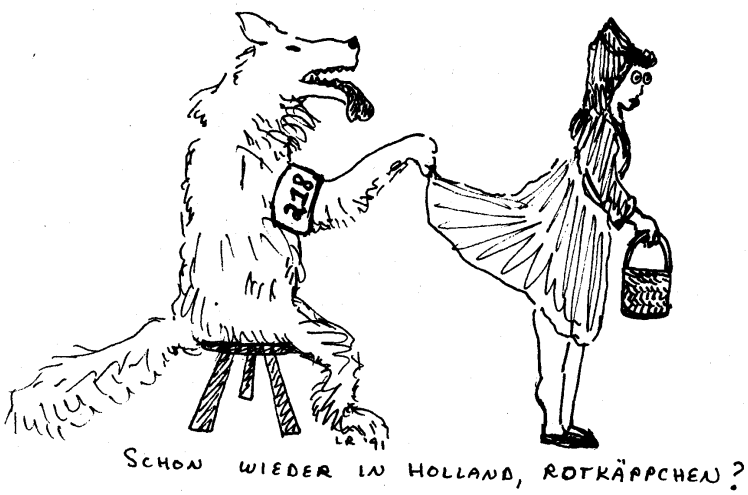

FIGURE 8.3

LISA: We became particularly engaged when the WiG Conference was hosted by the University of Minnesota's German program from 1988–90, and assisted with the conference planning and execution, as well as putting together the *WiG Newsletter*. For me, working on the *WiG Newsletter* was also a particular highlight. Julie Klassen (Carleton College) enlisted the assistance of graduate students in our department. We wrote some of the items, including conference reports, and cut and pasted the whole thing together on our department's few, highly coveted Apple *word processors*. Since I had an art background, I was enlisted to create drawings and cartoons, following the tradition established by Susan Cocalis. I knew that I wasn't at Susan's level as a cartoonist, but I did the best I could and tried to capture the spirit of WiG conferences and

3 From fall 1989 to fall 1994 (issues 50 to 65) the *WiG Newsletter* was produced in Minnesota—with Julie Klassen as coordinator and University of Minnesota grad students as the editorial staff.

other issues we were addressing.[4] And then there were the conferences themselves!

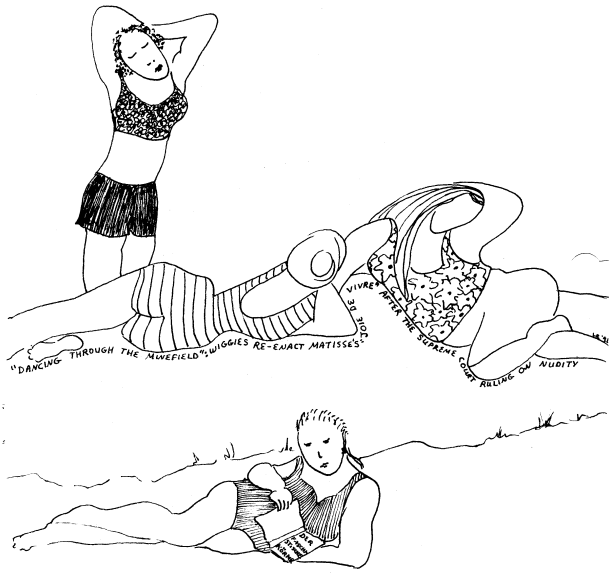

FIGURE 8.4

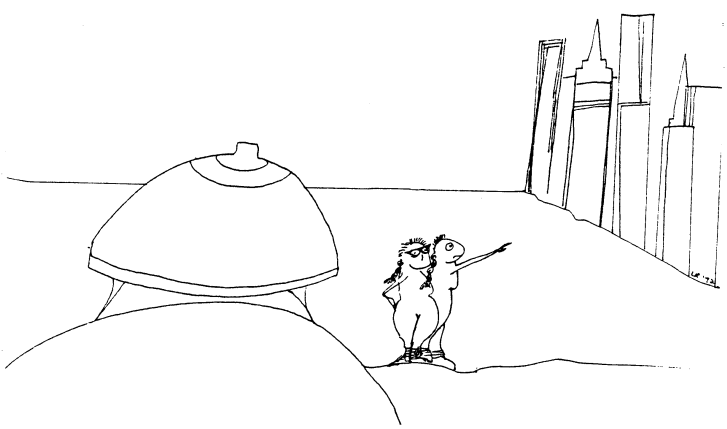

FIGURE 8.5

4 See Figures 3–5: "Schon wieder in Holland, Rotkäppchen?"; "Dancing Through the Minefield"; and "Landing Party from the Planet Herstra."

I think when we talk about WiG we also must acknowledge the many ways that feminist practice took place, from the community process for determining future conferences to the business meeting, where I first learned what went into balancing a budget for an organization. (I do a lot of that now as a university administrator.) And then there was the cabaret, a space of playful subversiveness, where we could address the conference and other topics through satire, with various WiG members being enlisted to ad-lib particular parts. Some of this was pure fun—yes, play—and a chance for a cathartic moment after a long conference. Typically, topics or issues that arose from the conference would appear in the cabaret—whether it was a dramatization of the complex intersectional encounters between the Idas (Pfeiffer and Hahn-Hahn) and those they met in their travels, or a tutorial in how to interview at the MLA, complete with helpful tips from the "Do-Bee"— and the silly and the ridiculous were front and center. I remember playing Tipper Gore to your Al Gore—I nearly lost my dime store blond Halloween wig as I raged against sexualized pop music, while you stood as stiffly as possible and tried to calm me down. However true to the cabaret form, some of it also dealt with more weighty contemporary issues affecting women, where satire was a way to critique what was intolerable, such as the sexual harassment of Anita Hill by then Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. It speaks for the character of the WiG community that we could both engage in serious scholarship and let down our hair (or: wigs?), trusting one another at the level needed to put on the cabaret.

LIZ: Absolutely! There are so many times when I've tried to explain WiG to the uninitiated, and when I get to the cabaret and the Sunday morning speakout (affectionately referred to by some as the "bitch and moan session") it really feels as if I am describing some sort of magical, secret society. Because neither of those rituals is a structure even remotely familiar from other professional conferences available to our colleagues and students elsewhere. These intimate ways of coming together not just as teachers, scholars, and administrators, but as whole people, both require and foster trust. Not that this is easy, nor perfect, by any stretch (see above re: competition), but it's an ongoing, deeply felt effort to respond to the very real needs of academics, particularly those

who acknowledge the role of their gendered selves in everything they do.

On Living Feminist Lives: Dropping Stitches While Weaving It All Together

LIZ: The heritage of so many years in WiG—still now, but especially in those earlier years as a student and young faculty member—has sustained me greatly at different times in my life, though more recently, I have found the threads harder to tie together into a cohesive cloth. My involvement in the organization has been intermittent, for so many reasons linked to the complexities of this stage of my life and career. How have your experiences from that time we shared under the mentorship of so many strong feminists—from our professors at Minnesota, and Ruth-Ellen in particular, to the members of WiG—influenced your life today?

LISA: My education completely changed the way I look at things intellectually. It's hard to remember a time when I lacked the tools and skills that I learned from my teachers and mentors, and now use as a matter of course. I am also awed by the incredible generosity and care of the professors who guided my journey as a student. They gave me not only an intellectual framework, but also the confidence to move forward, based on the knowledge that they believed in me. I didn't always believe myself that I could navigate *the profession*. But I did … to my immense relief.

I think where the rubber ultimately meets the road, however, is how you live your life. What does it mean to live as a feminist? I have lived a life of privilege as a middle-class white woman. I also know that feminists who came before me made possible my professional life, the fact that I have had meaningful work that pays a salary, and have been able to have a family, a child, and a personal life. As a feminist, I take it seriously that I should be supporting the next generation and helping them succeed in their careers. Giving my staff—many of whom are just beginning their careers—opportunities to grow professionally is immensely rewarding. That being said, there still remains a tension in the academy between measures of career success and women's lives. The old ideas of complete devotion to the academy as a *calling* still exist, as one per-

son who interviewed me for an academic job once threw back in my face, when I inquired about retirement benefits at their institution. We still need to stand up and stand up for others. Women working in the academy have always had lives outside of the university, as did our teachers and mentors. It can be incredibly messy and complicated as we juggle our professional lives and competing demands—the responsibilities, activities, engagements—that form our lives. However, I get the sense that more of us are now asking for and getting greater flexibility to have a personal life and try to gain the elusive work/life balance.

Liz, what have your experiences been with making life choices like this? Is there such a thing as work/life balance, or is it just a chimera intended to make us work more, and harder? And as a larger question, is there a way you think we can use our choices to make things better for the next generation?

LIZ: Our education was incredibly empowering, no doubt about it. Working in literary and cultural studies—developing critical capacities as readers and interpreters not only of classic literary texts from other times and places, but also of the signs and symbols surrounding us here and now—was nothing short of mind blowing at times. Being offered new lenses through which to do this, among them one that intersected the core of my embodied experience as I entered adulthood—that of feminist theory and criticism—endowed the entire endeavor with a kind of existential importance. But alongside the greater sense of agency that feminism gave me, that heightened awareness also made everything more complicated, both professionally and personally. My greatest internal struggles, in the years since I left graduate school and entered the working world, have revolved around the deeply entrenched social expectations for professorhood *and* for motherhood.

The romanticized roots of each of those roles are buried so very deep, both in the cultures that feed them and in the soil of my identity. The interviewer who told you "it's a calling"—and in doing so, negated your legitimate concerns about how the job was linked with your life more broadly—was speaking from that place. And whether it's the professoriate telling us that we should live and breathe for the *life of the mind*, or every single media outlet reminding us of the mystical power of motherhood, neither of these messages supports an integrated sense of self. In my favorite book

on the subject, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, novelist Rachel Cusk peels back the layers of loss and disorientation that accompanied the experience of motherhood for her, and questions the veracity of all of those myths through vividly embodied description. The greatest challenge I have experienced is figuring out how to meet my own expectations for myself as a professor *and* as a mother simultaneously. Visible models of excellence or success in both arenas simultaneously are hard to find, and neither institution (i.e., the academy or motherhood) makes the task particularly easy.

The sexism—and the heteronormativity—of the system rears itself in some of the most mundane moments where the personal and the professional intersect. Try this: close your eyes and imagine walking into a male professor's office and seeing school photos of children on his desk. Without thinking, notice the images that come up spontaneously, unbidden: how does that glimpse of domesticity intersect with your image of him as a scholar? Do you imagine a messy life, frantic struggles with time and competing demands? Or do you imagine, even without really seeing her, a *wife*—a marginalized domestic partner—who tends to those children and their needs; a separate sphere, safely cordoned off from the professor's *life of the mind*? There's a reason I've felt ambivalent about putting my own kids' pictures on display in my office, and it is only partially explained by the sexist double standards that persist in academia, decades of real progress notwithstanding. It's also a conundrum I have never quite resolved for myself. In eighteen years of parenthood, I have felt all too keenly the threat that children pose to my scholarly self, for they lay their righteous claim to my time, energy, passion, and desire. Their presence in my life has changed me profoundly—just as profoundly as our feminist education did my young adult self. Figuring out how to marry (ha!) these identities remains a complication without resolution.

To respond at last to your powerful closing question (you'll have noticed that I took my time getting here!): I am moved by your suggestion that we pause, reflect, and reframe the choices we have made for ourselves, and consider their possible utility for others. I hesitate to generalize too much, but I will offer this modest note of optimism. In the intimate context of a relatively small graduate program, I observe that our students are coming of age with different expectations for themselves and for the profession than we did. At least here in my large, public, land-grant institution, they are far

less likely to buy into the monkish mystique of the professoriate, and are focusing a skeptical eye, early in their studies already, on the shape of a life like mine. With few exceptions, they see these complexities and question the value of traditional academic pathways. They are (more) ready to poke holes in the narratives that gave shape to our emerging selves. What can we offer to make things better? More than anything, I think, we must aggressively destigmatize any and all life choices, making it safe for them to express their doubts and concerns in dialogue with us, their advisers and teachers and mentors. Maybe, take a page from the feminist practices of WiG, and create space *inside* the academy for students to assert all of their selves.

LISA: Reflecting on how we began this conversation with our Liz/Lisa dual identity, it's interesting to me that our long friendship still rests on a foundation strongly influenced by our feminist teachers and mentors. I think for those of us who have devoted our professional lives to higher education, we believe strongly in its mission, however imperfect the academy may be. I think that higher education is one of the most impactful spaces where social change is happening today. And here is where I must believe that our actions are impacting students to some degree, just as our teachers and mentors helped shape our lives. I would agree with you that I am particularly proud of this generation, for their commitment to probing, contesting, challenging, and protesting. In their case, I would argue, the stakes are higher than when we were in school. The political landscape of the 1980s, however disturbing at the time, looks tame compared to today's challenges to our democratic principles. Our students are dealing with climate change that will impact their lives and those of their children, as well as the continued challenges of economic inequity, systemic racial disparity, and race-based violence, not to mention a global pandemic. However, I meet so many students who understand that higher education can be a way to get at these problems, to gain tools to help solve them. I see some who work from within the system, and others who take more radical approaches. I was particularly struck by a protest sign from a recent Black Lives Matter march that said, "You've messed with the wrong generation." This is a generation that has the self-awareness and the tenacity to create positive change. I have hope.

LIZANDLISA: We began this process by sifting through old papers and swapping stories, an endeavor that itself feels something like pure privilege. Going down that rabbit hole, and engaging in the ensuing exchange, has been good for our souls. The generative powers of reflection, exchange with an *intimate*, and the blessed act of writing itself, has brought us closer and allowed each of us to reclaim a once-familiar part of herself. Of course, Ruth-Ellen could have told us that would happen—and she did, all those years ago, when she first set before us, with the excitement of new discovery, the letters and diaries of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German women … and our first encounter with self-life-writing. We hope that this dialogue offers encouragement to others to carve out time and space for reflection on their own feminist friendships.

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