

## **ACTIVISM OF FEMINIST NANCY TOPPING BAZIN:**

**My activism developed out of the following:**

- my mother's belief in and practice of tolerance**
- my mother's consciousness of class differences**
- my love of French and interest in learning about cultures different from my own; therefore, in college I befriended foreign students at Ohio Wesleyan University.**
- my roommate telling me "people might talk" because I did the jitterbug with an African-American and had a date with a young man from China.**
- my picketing a barbershop in Delaware, Ohio, because, in 1954, people of color could not get a haircut in that town but instead had to go all the way to Columbus, Ohio.**
- my decision, in 1954, to join two others in de-activating from the Chi Omega sorority, because we found out the southern headquarters would not allow African-Americans to join that sorority anywhere in the U.S.A.**
- a year in Paris enjoying the diverse population of the Latin Quarter.**
- as a Stanford University graduate student, following the Cuban missile crisis and the threat of nuclear war with a Cuban friend, listening to lectures by economist professor Paul Baran, hearing about the House Un-American Activities protests in San Francisco where protesters were washed down the steps with fire hoses, hearing Edward Teller make people laugh as he talked about firestorms and dropping hydrogen bombs, watching films about the impact on people of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, hearing about plans for public school students to buy a paper sleeping bag to protect themselves from nuclear war, hearing about an advocate for \$35 bomb shelters, knowing people who had solid bomb shelters or had the trunk of their car packed, ready to flee to Canada in case of a nuclear war-- all this made me more of a pacifist and a better analyst of political power.**
- a trip through the Caribbean islands, the three Guianas, Brazil, Senegal, Guinea, Ghana, Liberia, and Morocco where I learned more about imperialism and the developing world.**

**--My feminist consciousness was undeveloped as I married a Frenchman, Maurice Jacques Bazin, in 1958 and had a baby in Paris in 1962. I believed that a child should be raised by its own mother. During that 1962-63 year, I read but dismissed Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex and Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique as irrelevant to my life. However, I experienced and did not enjoy the isolation of my life as a mother in a four-room apartment—where a knock on the door by a Moroccan carpet seller was a welcome diversion. French mothers all seemed to have Spanish or Portuguese nannies who watched their children while they went on with their professional lives. Therefore, female friends were not easy to find.**

**--Because my husband was considered in France to be too young to have a teaching position, he wrote only one job letter and was hired by Princeton as an Assistant Professor of Physics. After taking comprehensive exams on every period of British literature, I had left Stanford University with my doctoral dissertation on feminist Virginia Woolf unwritten. Princeton was still an all-male university, so when I tried to use the English reading room in the library, I did not feel welcome as the only female. Although my life as a full-time mother was better in the U.S.A with other mothers in the neighborhood, I experienced, like Virginia Woolf, the feeling on being unwelcome on an all-male college campus. Because Virginia Woolf was a feminist in the earlier movement, she was teaching me to be a feminist as I analyzed her novels. Until my book (1973) and one by Herbert Marder (1968), written independently each from the other, there had been no readings of Woolf from a feminist perspective. Because my consciousness changed as I wrote, my title changed from The Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf to Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision. In 1973, the year my book was published, Carolyn Heilbrun's Toward the Recognition of Androgyny and Adrienne Rich's poem "The Stranger" (in which she wrote, "I am the androgyne") were also published. This was a cultural moment that led to a session on Androgyny at the next meeting of the Modern Language Association and a special issue of Women's Studies, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1974) on androgyny. For it, I co-authored (with my graduate student Alma Freeman) an essay entitled "The Androgynous Vision" and put together myself an annotated bibliography on "The Concept of Androgyny." This "vision," enhanced by my reading of Kate**

**Millett's Sexual Politics and the section on Independent Women in The Second Sex (Millett's inspiration), guided for the next several years my feminist readings of the literature I taught. My feminist education was furthered also by Elaine Showalter's speeches at the Modern Language Association, several articles in the journal of the National Council of Teachers of English, Shulamith Firestone's The Dialectic of Sex and Sisterhood Is Powerful edited by Robin Morgan.**

**Soon after I started teaching at Rutgers College in 1971, I chose to go to Buffalo to attend my first all-female conference—oddly, not one about literature or women's studies but one on Women in the Arts. There I met Faith Ringgold, whom I invited to exhibit her work, first at Rutgers and later at Old Dominion University. As Faith demonstrated, women's art included quilts and, as a Pittsburgh museum showed, needlework. In a 1971 issue of Art News, Linda Nochlin published her essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Much of what Nochlin said about women artists was applicable to women writers. Aided by Florence Howe's The Feminist Press, feminist English teachers were searching for previously unrecognized women writers. KNOW in Pittsburgh collected syllabi to share. Recognition in the past had been limited mainly to Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot, who had used male names to gain what fame they had. Still, when their real names were revealed, critics claimed their brother must have written their novels.**

**As an "activist," my focus was on teaching literature from a feminist perspective, which included recognizing in literature patriarchal attitudes and beliefs that impede women's development and happiness. We noted that in most 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels, a central character who was female could only die to escape her misery. These Victorian females were unable to find reasonable solutions because of society's restrictions on women. Examples are George Eliot's Mill on the Floss, Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary, and Kate Chopin's The Awakening. Many Victorian mothers in fiction had died in childbirth. Without birth control or abortions, they often had 11-12 children, if they lived that long. Their husbands legally owned them and their children. The difficult situation of African women was revealed in the novels of Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, and Aminata Sowfall. As the**

consciousness of twentieth-century women writers and the public evolved because of the women's movement, female characters began to have more choices. In my classes, we did not ignore the writing skills or distort the literature. We simply substituted a clearer way of seeing, as if a veil had fallen from in front of our eyes. I also wrote about alcoholism in literature, as in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood, or Athol Fugard's Master Harold...and the Boys. Traditionally ignored by readers, we noted how it often hurt the family through sexual abuse, violence, and emotional pain.

I participated in peace and Take Back the Night marches, but my activism was not usually on the street. I raised students' consciousness and they, in turn, created a Women's Center for the city of New Brunswick, NJ, for example. They were no longer silent when men touched them inappropriately in a public place; they proclaimed aloud what the men had done. Lesbians felt safe and able to speak frankly in interdisciplinary classes, and we read novels like Rita Mae Brown's Rubyfruit Jungle (1973). Contemporary women poets spoke in words and ways students could understand—among them, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Marge Piercy, Maya Angelou, Muriel Rukeyser, Maxine Kumin, Gwendolyn Brooks, Denise Levertov, Nikki Giovanni, and Diane Wakoski. Through my efforts, outstanding feminists came to campus to read, speak, or sing: Robin Morgan, Mary Daly, Toni Morrison, Doris Lessing, Anais Nin, Barbara Ehrenreich, Susan Friedman, Maya Angelou, Florence Howe, Peggy McIntosh, Toni Cade Bambara, Bella Abzug, Helen Thomas, and Kristin Lems, to name just a few.

Today I appreciate very much the Me Too movement and the importance of sharing our experiences and holding the men accountable. As a teenager, I had an eye doctor who put both his hands on my breasts while my mother sat just outside in the waiting room. The boyfriend of my dance teacher put his hands on my breasts in the basement of the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh while I was waiting to perform. When I was waiting to go onstage to do a dance in a "light opera," one of the star singers placed his hands on my breasts and on those of a girl even younger than I. The younger girl told her

**mother who called me to ask that I watch over her daughter, but, like most girls at that time, I did not tell my parents, because I feared it would create a major “fuss.” I am also a financial supporter of Emily’s List. I am glad to have them recommend to me those women candidates who will support women’s right to have control of their own bodies. We desperately need more feminist women running for political positions on all levels. I also support the League of Women Voters. Finally, I contribute each year to the Nancy Topping Bazin Graduate Scholarship in Women’s Studies that was created in my honor when I retired from Old Dominion University in the year 2000. Each year a women’s studies student receives a scholarship from it. If you wish to contribute so the fund will continue to grow beyond my lifetime, please send a check to The Educational Foundation; Old Dominion University; Norfolk, VA 23529. Be sure to make clear that the money is for the Nancy Topping Bazin Graduate Scholarship in Women’s Studies. In addition to offering excellent courses, the ODU Women’s Studies Department has enabled some students to improve the lives of women in South Africa and others to teach and help female refugees in Newport News, VA.**