



Women Involved in
Living and Learning

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Learning**

**WINTER
2007**

*News from the
WILL Program
of Westhampton
College at the
University of
Richmond
for its alumnae
and friends*

WILL NEWS

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTORS

Happy 2007! After a busy fall, we are looking ahead to an equally busy and exciting spring semester. We are midway through our speaker series on Environmental Justice, and we hope you will look over the spring schedule inside and join us for these upcoming events. Also, as we mentioned in the summer newsletter, we are working on creating an online community of WILL alumnae and current students—we will keep you posted on these details as this project progresses.

In WILL news, we traveled with current WILL junior Allison DuVal and alumna Lisa Swaby-Rowe to Oakland, CA where we presented on the WILL program at the National Women's Studies Association conference last June. We were thrilled to have several schools represented in the audience who have replicated WILL and now have their own WILL-like programs. It was a great time and space to connect with these programs and to learn about some of the most interesting and innovative research currently being conducted in the field of women's studies.

Also, we were excited to welcome alumnae back to campus for the WILL Homecoming Event in October. It was great to see the living room of the Deanery filled with current students and alumnae having conversations about their lives.

In our next issue, we look forward to updating you on some of the exciting activism projects that our students have been pursuing, and as always, please stay in touch about your own lives and interests by emailing Melissa Ooten at mooten@richmond.edu.

Melissa Ooten and Holly Blake

CONTINUING ENGAGEMENT

This spring, the WILL Colloquium, the program's introductory course, will be offered for 3 credit hours. This change will allow us more time to discuss pertinent issues, and it will also give students the credit they deserve since its reading and assignment list has mirrored that of a three-credit course for some time—as many of you know! We thought you may be interested in reading some of the books that first-years and sophomores in the Colloquium will be reading this spring.

- Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo* (2003)
- Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (2003)
- bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody* (2000)
- Bill Keller, *Class Matters* (2005)
- Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968)
- Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1997)



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WILL/WGSS/QUEST SPEAKER SERIES: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE – SPRING 2007 EVENTS

LOIS GIBBS

*Citizen Activism for Environmental Health:
The Growth of a Powerful New Grassroots Health Movement*

Tuesday, February 6, 7:00 pm, Brown-Alley Room, Weinstein Hall

Nearly thirty years ago, 900 working-class families at Love Canal demanded relocation after learning that their community was built on a leaking toxic waste dump. This grassroots effort demonstrated how ordinary citizens obtained power through community organizing, sparking a new social justice movement which is as concerned with social justice and human rights as it is with public health and the environment.

In addition to her talk, Gibbs will conduct a workshop on how to organize for environmental action earlier that day (2:00–3:30 pm). All are welcome—please email mooten@richmond.edu for further details.

THE NEXT GENERATION:

How Two Richmond Schools Teach Kids to Care about the Environment

Thursday, April 5, 4:00 pm, Brown-Alley Room, Weinstein Hall

How do we get today's children interested in the environment when we are living in a society increasingly removed from the natural world? Carroll Ellis, earth science teacher and trainer in Richmond city schools, and Richmond Montessori School teachers Robin Righetti, Lynne Sullivan and Michele Fojieck will discuss ways they inspire children to see their connections to the environment, care for the environment and develop skills to study, investigate and make a difference in the world in which they live.

APPALACHIAN ACTIVISM with Kate Larken, Rema Keen, and Patricia Johnson

Thursday, April 12, 7:00 pm, Alice Haynes Room

A musician, a poet, and a storyteller combine their creative expressions and promote activism addressing intertwined issues of land (both its historical destruction and hopes for its future preservation), class, racism, violence against women, sexual identity, and identities as Appalachian women. Their artistry promotes and supports diverse cultures, sustainable living, environmental justice, and grassroots organizing.

Recommended Readings on Issues of Environmental Justice & Activism

- Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (2005)
- Melissa Checker, *Polluted Promises: Environmental Racism and the Search for Justice in a Southern Town* (2005)
- Julian Agyeman, *Sustainable Communities and the Challenge of Environmental Justice* (2005)
- Jonathan Harr, *A Civil Action* (1995)
- Sandra Steingraber, *Living Downstream: A Scientist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment* (1998)
- Susan Buckingham-Hatfield, *Gender and Environment* (2000)
- Michael Sanera, *Facts, Not Fear: Teaching Children about the Environment* (1999)
- Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Originally released in 1962; now available in a 40th anniversary edition)
- Steve Lerner and Robert Ballard, *Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor* (2005)
- Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (2000)

Screening Women

Welcome to our new, regular feature analyzing the work of women both on screen and behind the camera in the film and television industry. My academic interests focus on analyzing popular culture, particularly the genre of film, and how the issues we often analyze in women, gender, and sexuality studies—issues of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and geographic boundaries—intersect in popular media. To this end, I hope to regularly offer reviews of films and television shows, both current and classic, to help us begin conversations about how we can more consciously interrogate the meanings within what we often term as our “entertainment.” I welcome suggestions as to films and television shows that you would like to see reviewed, and guest reviewers are also encouraged. Email me at mooten@richmond.edu with your suggestions or reviews. For this first review, I chose the critically-acclaimed *North Country* (2005). I hope it will encourage you to watch the movie if you have not already seen it, and begin your own conversations and debates about it among your friends and family!

—Melissa Ooten

North Country (2005)

The film *North Country*, directed by New Zealander Niki Caro, follows Josie Aimes (played by Charlize Theron) as she becomes one of the few women to work in the Minnesota taconite mines. The film is based on the real story of Lois Jensen, who along with her co-workers, won the first class-action lawsuit based on sexual harassment charges in American history in 1998.

In 1989, the year the film begins, women accounted for less than 5% of mine workers, despite court orders from the 1970s demanding that mine companies make at least 20% of their workforce women. The winter landscape and the ominous soundtrack combine to create a bleak picture as a clearly battered Josie moves her and her two children to her parents’ house to escape her violent husband. These opening scenes are interjected with scenes of Josie testifying at a future trial. From the beginning, we see judgment seeping from everyone Josie meets. In the trial scenes, we hear the judge ask when she had her first child, who the father is, and if she does not know who the father is because she has had so many sexual partners. These scenes are interlaced with her arrival at a church function where her parents’ friends whisper about “her two kids by two different fathers—already.” Thus her sexuality—and her worth as a human being based on this sexuality—is emphasized from the film’s beginning.

Working as a hairdresser, a friend (Glory, played by Frances McDormand) tells Josie that she could make six times her current pay by working at the mines. When Josie tells her father, a relationship that is fraught throughout the movie [and fictional to the real story], he responds: “you want to be a lesbian now?” Thus we begin to see homophobia interwoven with sexism at various key points in the movie. Yet Josie is solidly cast in clearly heterosexual terms. In many ways, this film is about masculinity and femininity in the setting of a Minnesota mining community. A friend’s husband calls Josie “kind of girlie to be a miner,” and I am left wondering if this is not an attempt on the filmmaker’s part to reassure us that Josie is unquestionably feminine and heterosexual.

Again, landscape and story overlap so that as we see the machinery ravage the earth, we will soon see the women miners equally attacked by their co-workers. Josie’s boss approaches her at a restaurant and announces: “I think you are one of my girls,” reinforcing her status as a dependent upon this man for a much-needed job. Further issues of class become clear in this scene as Josie encourages her children to enjoy their first time in a “nice restaurant” as the shot frames the vinyl seats of the booth in which they sit at what looks to be any generic pancake house in the country.

We see the women mine workers face one humiliation after another, with one of the first being that they must submit to a gynecological exam to rule out pregnancy before working at the mine, thus we see one of the first intrusions into Josie’s rights being mandated by company policy. The women must deal with graphic sexual graffiti, constant chants of “cunt,” and more not-so-subtle clues of sexism like the calendar hanging in the supervisor’s office of a barely clad woman with her legs fully spread as the women outside the office clean up the dangerous sludge of the mines. It is a toxic environment in every way.

Clips from Anita Hill’s testimony at Clarence Thomas’s Senate confirmation hearing for his appointment as a Supreme Court justice pops up in the background of the film. When Josie turns up the volume and we hear Hill chronicle how Thomas would talk about the size of his penis, Josie’s mother simply says “that poor man’s family,” clearly discounting Hill’s experiences and remarks—and Josie’s as well.

As Josie tries to organize the women against the harassment, we see dissent foment between them. One woman’s husband prevents her from attending the meeting, and others tell Josie that she can simply quit if she is dissatisfied. Others fear that they will lose their (well-paying) jobs, or they fear the men’s repercussions who, after all, they must work with for long hours every day. Still others fear they simply will not be taken seriously. Perhaps the culminating event is not even the rape of Josie on the job, for it is of little surprise given the absolutely horrific physical, verbal, and psychological harassment that the women face every day. Instead, it could be when Sherry’s (Michele Monaghan) male co-workers turn over the port-a-potty with her inside, and she tumbles out literally crawling through shit.

Josie’s sex life—and a judgment of that life—is always present. Even when she begins to legally pursue the case, she is reminded of Anita Hill and told to “Look at Anita Hill—she’s you,” which is meant to highlight the point that a courtroom is likely to be no more just and no less sexist than the workers at the mine. According to a lawyer, it’s the “nuts or slut” defense—she will either be dismissed as crazy or as a “slut.” And we see both attempts made at trial.

The movie chronicles the true story of Lois Jensen’s struggles against the Eveleth Taconite mining company, and many of the characters mirror those in the true story. But unfortunately, what does not become clear in the film is the long and arduous process of this lawsuit. Jensen suffered harassment from the beginnings of her work at the mine in 1975 when the mines, under court order, hired their first female employees. Nine years

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later, Jensen petitioned the Minnesota Human Rights office to force the mine to confront the harassers and help end the hostile working environment. However, this simply began a process that would not end for another fourteen years. In 1989, Jensen filed a formal lawsuit, and then a judge granted the lawsuit class-action status, the first ever for a sexual harassment law suit, in 1992. After multiple trials and appeals, fifteen women received \$3.5 million in damages in 1998 after pursuing legal recourse for nearly 15 years.

Yet we can hardly expect a two hour film to adequately convey the decades-long process that was required to begin to resolve these issues. And unfortunately, the harsh harassment and sexual assaults chronicled in the film are all too accurate of the torturous behavior the women faced on a daily basis—if anything, it is less intense because we only see it for an hour or two while women endured it on a daily basis for decades.

Both Charlene Theron and Frances McDormand give riveting performances, which earned them both Academy Award nominations. And it is hard to ignore any film made by a female director, given how few women work in the film industry's top position and the fact that no film directed by a woman has ever won the Academy Award for Best Picture, the industry's highest honor.

It is a depressing movie. The harassment and violence are difficult to watch, in part because it accurately portrays what happened and in part because it accurately portrays what can still happen. While sexual harassment may be more subtle in many settings, it is no less toxic and no less debilitating for those who face it. But this case established the precedent for legal recourse based on sexual harassment, and it forced companies to take sexual harassment complaints seriously. For more information on the Lois Jensen case, see Bingham and Gansler's book, *Class Action: The Story of Lois Jensen and the Landmark Case that Changed Sexual Harassment Law*.

—Melissa Ooten, 2006

WILL News is published twice a year to share ideas and information with WILL graduates and others interested in the University of Richmond's WILL program. We welcome letters, e-mails and other submissions.

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