

## **Women Writing Women's Lives Biography Seminar Sessions and Events, 2015-2016**

**October 2, 2015.** The seminar held its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference at the CUNY Graduate Center. The all-day event included three panels of seminar members. Panel One, "Whose Lives," featured Alix Kates Shulman, Diane Jacobs, and Carla L. Peterson, with Bell Gale Chevigny as chair. Panel Two, "Telling the Life Story," featured Sallie Bingham, Ruth Franklin, and Gail Levin, with Betty Boyd Caroli as chair. Panel Three, "Sources and Secrets," featured Blanche Wiesen Cook, Carla Kaplan, and Marnie Mueller, with Dorothy O. Helly as chair. Deirdre Bair, a founding member of the seminar, delivered the keynote address, "What Chutzpah! The Infinite Mischief of Writing Women's Lives." The seminar cosponsored the conference with the Leon Levy Center for Biography, CUNY Graduate Center's PhD Programs in History and English, MA Program in Liberal Studies, the Center for the Humanities, the Feminist Press at CUNY, and Women's National Book Association, NYC. Because of the conference, the seminar did not hold an October 2015 session or offer a Fall 2015 Dorothy O. Helly Works in Progress lecture.

**November 2, 2015.** This session focused on female documentarians. Seminar member Suzanne Wasserman, director of the Gotham Center, screened her documentary *Meat Hooked!*, about contemporary butchers. Seminar member Kathryn Hearst, currently working on a book about the documentary filmmaker Barbara Kopple, moderated the session, and Jill Norgren organized it.

**December 7, 2015.** This session featured guest speakers Jan Heller Levi, a poet and anthologist, and Christoph Keller, a novelist, memoirist, and playwright. Levi and Keller, who are married to one another, discussed their work on a biography of New York-born poet, biographer and feminist, Muriel Rukeyser. They addressed the process of working with a spouse, as well as the challenge of picking up a biographical project following another author's unfinished efforts. Julia Van Haften organized and moderated the session.

**January 4, 2016.** Guest speaker Bonnie Anderson, author of the forthcoming *The Rabbi's Atheist Daughter/Ernestine Rose/International Feminist Pioneer*, discussed balancing historical context and biography in her work on Rose. Kate Culkin organized and moderated the session. Beginning with this session, the meeting time changed from 4-5:45 to 3:30-5:30.

**February 7, 2016.** This session addressed the challenges of integrating a subject's creative work into her or his biography. Seminar member Diane Jacobs, the author of *Christmas in July: The Life and Art of Preston Sturges* who is currently working on a study of Edith Wharton in Paris, described her past experience integrating Sturges's film work with his life and compared her previous methods to her present strategies for combining Wharton's fiction with her life. Seminar member Carla Kaplan, author of *Miss Anne in Harlem: The White Women of the Black Renaissance* and the forthcoming *Queen of the Muckrakers: The Life and Times of Jessica Mitford*, addressed questions of how to incorporate close readings of creative work into a trade biography and when creative work can/cannot provide insight into personality. Barbara Fisher moderated the session. Dorothy O. Helly organized the session.

**March 7, 2016.** "How to Handle Your Subject's Most Unlikeable Traits/Behaviors/Choices" was the topic for our annual problem-solving session. Seminar members Marjorie G. Jones,

author of *The Life and Times of Mary Vaux Walcott*, Terese Svoboda, author of *Anything That Burns You: A Portrait of Lola Ridge, Radical Poet*, and Victoria Phillips, working on a biography of Martha Graham, discussed how they handle aspects of their subjects' lives they find unlikeable or problematic. Marnie Mueller moderated the session, and Kathy Chamberlain organized it.

**March 14, 2016.** Dorothy O. Helly Women Writing Women's Lives Works in Progress Lecture. *Beyond 'The Lottery': The Life of Shirley Jackson*. Seminar member Ruth Franklin, author of *A Thousand Darknenses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction*, discussed her forthcoming biography of Shirley Jackson. Jackson is best known for her story "The Lottery," but is also the author six psychologically complex novels as well as dozens of short stories. Franklin addressed the development of Jackson's fiction amid her turbulent marriage to Stanley Edgar Hyman, the literary critic, and their bustling household of four children. She discussed how Jackson's story encapsulates the dilemma faced by many midcentury American women: the desire to be at once a mother and an artist, to enjoy a rich family life while preserving space for the life of the mind. The event was co-sponsored by the CUNY Graduate Center's PhD Programs in History and English, Center for the Study of Women and Society, The Center for the Humanities and the MA Program in Liberal Studies, the Leon Levy Center for Biography, and the Feminist Press at CUNY.

**April 4, 2016.** "Memoir and Other Life Writing: Illuminating One's Own Life through the Lives of Others." Seminar member Lise Vogel, author of *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory*, discussed *Sidney and Lisa: My Father, His Lover, and Myself*, the memoir she is writing about herself, her father, and the woman who was her father's lover during the Spanish Civil War. She focused on how she came to write this work and reflected on the process of writing a memoir that has multiple subjects and voices rather than a single subject. Guest speaker Ann Burack-Weiss, author of *The Caregiver's Tale: Loss and Renewal in Memoirs of Family Life* (2006) and *The Lioness in Winter: Writing an Old Woman's Life* (2015), addressed the ways in which she has incorporated many forms of Life Writing (autobiography, memoir, personal essays, speeches) in her narrative work – and how the voices of others have helped her find her own voice. Seminar member Frances Vieta, author of *Love in the Land of Barefoot Soldiers* discussed *Looter's Paradise: Recovering Italy's Plundered Treasures*, her work-in-progress which is part memoir and part non-fiction and tells the story of how she helped Italian authorities to recover stolen Italian art and antiquities. Patricia Auspos moderated and organized the session.

**May 2, 2016.** This session focused on the creation of African American collections and archives in the first half of the twentieth-century and addressed the often-obscured role that women played in the process. Guest speaker Melanie Chambliss, whose dissertation for the Northwestern Department of History is titled *Saving the Race: Black Archives and the Shaping of African American History 1914-1968*, examined the ways that the contrasting absences surrounding librarians Vivian Harsh's and Charlemae Rollins's lives can inform our understanding of the George Cleveland Hall branch library in Chicago. Guest speaker Laura Helton, who is working on a manuscript titled *Collecting and Collectivity: Black Archival Publics, 1900-1950*, addressed how Dorothy Porter, longtime curator of Howard University's Moorland Foundation, rewrote taxonomies of knowledge as a bibliographer

and cataloger, in order to render the African diaspora as warranting complex and capacious delineation. Helton also addressed how she used sources such as catalog cards, book classification schemas, and bibliographies to examine Porter's work. The session was moderated and organized by Carla Peterson.

**June 7, 2016.** The Barbara McManus Luncheon. "Hearing Ota Benga: Crafting Counternarratives from the Margins of History." Guest speaker Pamela Newkirk is an award winning journalist, the author of *Spectacle: the Astonishing Life of Ota Benga*, and a former fellow at the Leon Levy Center for Biography. She discussed her work on Benga, a Congolese man who was displayed in the New York Zoological Gardens in 1904, attracting thousands of visitors and international attention.