

**Veronica Strong-Boag (WMST, Educational Studies)**

*Interviewed by: Christine Harris, 2000*

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CH: What is your current position at UBC?

VS: I am a joint appointment between Women's Studies and Educational Studies. Educational Studies is in the Faculty of Education and Women's Studies is in the Faculty of Arts and I've been a joint appointment since 1997. When I came to UBC I was in Graduate Studies as the Director of the Centre for Research in Women's Studies and Gender Relations. I wasn't in Women's Studies to start. I moved over once I left the directorship.

CH: Is a joint appointment advantageous? Why or why not? How do Women's Studies and Educational Studies relate?

VS: Yes, they work very well together as areas because Education has a number of feminists working at UBC and the area has a good deal of feminist scholarship. While I wasn't in an Education Faculty previous to coming to UBC, the kind of work I do has regularly examined children's experiences and girls' experiences in school. UBC has a "history of education" area and I knew the folks really well, so it was very easy for me with a joint appointment. I've been a joint appointment previously in Women's Studies and History up at SFU. Before I came to UBC in 1991 I'd been a joint appointment for 10 years. It doesn't suit everybody but it suits me.

CH: We read an article about the pros and cons of interdisciplinarity and they were talking about joint appointments, how it is difficult having another strain on your life, another department to please, other students.

VS: I've just loved it, though. It worked for me because I am able to 'do' history in a variety of disciplinary/interdisciplinary locations. I love being a historian. All my degrees are in history, but I have always had lots of friends and certainly lots of intellectual engagement in Women's Studies that I wouldn't have had in history. And I've been very fortunate that the work I do in history has always been acceptable and more than acceptable in Women's Studies so I've never had to present myself differently. For some people that might be a problem; they might have to present themselves differently, live two kinds of lives in different locations. I was very fortunate, because I came from the University of Toronto in the 1970s, which was the senior history department in the country. I was arrogant or naïve enough to assume that, if I were doing Women's Studies, every history department that was any good would be supportive. That assumption armoured me quite effectively. In history, my departments have been generally quite supportive. I was the first woman at Trent's history department, the second when I arrived at Concordia University, and one of two women at Simon Fraser. As part of a small, sometimes tiny, group, it was sometimes quite lonely; on the other hand you were considered eccentric just by existing, so I found I had a good deal of

freedom. I was not like some junior faculty who enter faculty positions to become just very, very focused on their department. They end up knowing very little about the university as a whole. I started organizing activities to meet other women as an undergraduate and as a graduate student and I continue to organize as a faculty member. I was really fortunate because I knew pretty much all the women and all the progressive men who were teaching at my first three universities. I know that many of people in the 1970s and 1980s didn't have such positive experiences, but mine were actually pretty much so. I enjoyed life as an activist student and as an activist faculty member. I also was constantly reassured by knowing there were feminists in and around the universities who were very supportive. I never felt really alone. On the other hand I don't want to make it sound easier than it was. Certainly some parts were rough, but in general life was exciting and interesting and I would compare my career very favourably in terms of satisfaction with that of any of my male colleagues.

CH: What inspires you to teach?

VS: Well, I continue to believe that history is really important and that my Women's Studies courses, as you may remember, are for me an extension of history.

CH: Why at a university and not at a high school?

VS: Because I love research. I was recently asked by one of my students which I liked best, teaching or research. I know she thought I'd say teaching because I did enjoy her class a good deal. In fact, I don't. It was quite accidental that I found I really liked teaching. Teaching's always been a pleasure. But I loathe and detest marking. I love meeting students and I've had wonderful students over the years. But no, if I could only do one thing (and I wouldn't like to do just one thing), I would do research.

CH: How much of your time is spent on research and how much on teaching?

VS: Mostly I do about a third of administration of one kind or another, a third teaching, and a third research. Sometimes the administration takes up more time but it's usually a third, third, third.

CH: How did you decide on history as a field of study?

VS: Again, I was really fortunate. At six or so I knew exactly what I wanted to be. I was going to be a historian. At times I considered law or the diplomatic corps but I soon realized I didn't have the temperament. And the more I thought about law the duller it sounded. Certainly by the time I was in high school, law and the diplomatic corps dropped away, and I decided on history. Then I started to receive scholarships and awards for history it so I never had to do anything else.

CH: Why is Canadian women's history important?

VS: Because the history of the country is incomplete without it. Canadian history means

something in the world because we're one of those experiments (in the same way that Switzerland is an experiment) about multicultural living. We have a distinctive tradition that draws on France, Britain, the United States, and the First Nations. Women benefit from this very fractured national identity. Although people can regularly (and do) say women shouldn't do this or that, there are always multiple traditions that say something else is a possibility. Since there's no certainty, as there might be in the United States or even Australia, about what constitutes the national identity; women and multiple groups can assert that they have a right to a larger place in that culture, about which nobody is very certain. This environment presents a wonderful opportunity at the beginning of the 21st century when we're considering how we work together as a world community.

CH: Is it different teaching history as a Women's Studies course than it is as a history course?

VS: Very much. I haven't taught 'plain' history since I came to UBC, and there are some things I miss. I miss teaching the SFU football team. Most of them took the introductory Canadian history course and we all learned a great deal. Women's Studies is more intimate; people are there because they have real interest. It is very instructive to talk and listen to a largely female community with the usual addition of several interested and intelligent men. It's a very privileged teaching situation; you don't get that very often.

CH: How do you include feminism in courses that are not explicitly feminist?

VS: Well it's always there, I can't imagine not including it, because anything that I teach in terms of content contains a good deal on race, class, gender and sexuality, and issues around social justice. I don't know how I could teach it without acknowledging the centrality of my feminist perspective.

CH: What research are you currently involved in?

VS: Well, I just finished a two-volume study of Pauline Johnson, who was a mixed-race poet, with Carol Gerson, who's in English at SFU. The first volume is coming out in May (2000)\* and the second in 2002. The second will include her poetry, prose and short stories. And I am just in the midst of starting a book which will examine how kids are raised in Canada from the seventeenth-century to the present. I am especially interested in issues of adoption and social parenting. We often assume that children are normally and best raised by biological parents. In point of fact, history shows us that communities raise kids in many different ways. I'm also editing a book with Cheryl Warsh on the medical history of children's health and preparing a fourth edition of Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's Issue. These provide my research focus for the next five years, until I go on sabbatical, and then I may write another biography.

CH: You've done quite a bit of collaboration with other feminist authors, is that better for you to do that, do you get different things out of it?

VSB: It means, if you are fortunate, that you learn things you don't expect to learn. And I've been fortunate. I've had people who complemented my strengths and who addressed my weaknesses, such as Gillian Creese, who's a faculty member here in sociology.

CH: She's been interviewed this year.

VSB: She's much more a political economist than I am. I'm more interested in literature, biography, and story-telling. Gillian curbs my tendency to hyperbole and I really enjoy working with her. In my collaboration with Carol Gerson, she concentrated on Pauline Johnson's contributions to the literary canon and the kinds of poetic forms that she used. I focussed on nationalism, on the new woman, and the significance of the First Nations. With collaboration, if you are lucky, you can do the things that really interest you.

CH: So it works out well.

VSB: Yes.

CH: How does this research relate to your teaching?

VSB: Well, at the moment, my students are getting a great deal about Pauline Johnson so whatever I am doing tends to be reflected very directly on the classroom.

CH: What methods do you typically employ in your research?

VSB: Historians are very eclectic. We borrow methods from everybody. History is very interdisciplinary. I always tell my history students is to go and examine everything there is, use all the methods that are appropriate or useful, and borrow from everybody else. You discover some things you're better at. I am not particularly good at interviews. I really find them very difficult. If you're interviewing people and have to ask personal questions, I really hate it. As a historian I might interview very elderly people and some things are very hard to recall. I feel intrusive, that I'm asking things that might embarrass or trouble them. Some people enjoy this kind of research. I prefer other methods, whether textual analysis, or archival research.

CH: Would you say there's any one kind of particular feminist methodology?

VSB: No. I think a feminist methodology is any methodology which is respectful of subjects and which tries to consider the context of geography, class, race, or whatever, and the particularities of individuals.

CH: How has your research or approach to research changed over the years?

VSB: It has changed massively. I trained in the British empirical tradition, a very narrative school. I learned a great deal, but race was not visible when I did my degrees in the '60s and '70s. Generally speaking, I discovered gender in the 1960s, then class in the early '70s, then race and sexuality in the 1980s. These discoveries were really about being

in Women's Studies. Issues around First Nations came directly out of my experience as the Director of the Centre for Research in Women's Studies and Gender Relations at UBC. When I was there I learned from First Nations people at the First Nations House of Learning and also from my Education department which had two First Nations faculty, as well as students. Of course, then I happened, really quite coincidentally, on Pauline Johnson and started to read postcolonial criticism. I started to ask what I was doing, how I could have done all this work and not have thought much about race and First Nations issues.

CH: But it was really Women's Studies that sparked that change?

VS: Yes, Women's Studies informed it and then I took it back to the history.

CH: In what ways is your work feminist?

VS: Well, women are always centre-front in all of my research, women and gender. I work on female subjects but my interests are female subjects within particular times and places. I'm very committed to tracing the connections between inequality and oppression for some and privilege for others. As a Canadian nationalist I am also concerned about issues to do with citizenship and globalization, which has to mean social justice for women, as it means social justice for other groups.

CH: What are some of the limitations of your work?

VS: I'm not a theorist. I have an interest in what theory allows us to do but I'm not interested in theory as such. I'm interested in the utility of theory, rather than debates about it. I guess the other area in which my work is weak, is the lack of quantitative methods.

CH: I find it easier to read work that doesn't have a lot of theory in it, so that could be a strength of your work too, if it doesn't include a lot of theory.

VS: Exactly. History attracts me because in essence it's about narratives and I find storytelling endlessly interesting and informative.

CH: What have been some of the reactions to your research, positive and negative?

VS: There have always been some people who didn't like what I did and occasionally I have received unsympathetic reviews. For the most part, however, responses have been supportive. I became President of the Canadian Historical Association. If my work had not been well received I wouldn't have been elected. I was fortunate when I started out because almost everybody at last agreed women should be in universities and in history. It may be harder for women coming along now because a fair number of us have made a difference over the years: the literature, for example, is now relatively abundant, certainly in comparison with twenty years ago. Now it's a question of whether men will actually maintain control. One woman in a department is not going to threaten male

power. She may occasionally make male colleagues uncomfortable, but a single person has limited power to change an institution. Now, with more women and feminists more generally, the situation could change dramatically.

CH: What are your experiences as a mother in the university?

VS: Well, I had three pregnancies and one maternity leave. With my first child I took a year of unpaid leave. I just took it for granted that that's what you did to survive and I wrote a book. Now of course you don't have to do that. Among colleagues in history, my pregnancies were largely ignored. In Women's Studies people were all very supportive and other women were having babies. That was great. For my second child, Simon Fraser provided a very supportive environment in terms of daycare, where I was introduced to people all around the university. As a mother and a scholar, you have to be very, very organized. I really don't advise young women to have babies before they've got a really clear idea of where they are and some financial security. I was thirty-two when I had my first child and forty-two when I had my last. While I moved around a lot in terms of universities, I pretty much knew who I was as an adult and was pretty sure about my job prospects. I can remember when I was pregnant with my third son one of my male colleagues up at Simon Fraser just looked at me and said "Nikki, are you pregnant again!" This comment was clearly uncalled for, and I responded, "fertile of mind, fertile of body." But I thought, excuse me, this is really none of your business..

CH: But you were like a novelty.

VS: The downside of parenting is that you're likely to be tired much of the time. I was just talking with another woman historian over at UVic who's writing for the special history edition of *Atlantis*. She also works in Women's Studies. She asked me what I had done in the 1980s and I had to say I was having babies. Quite honestly, I see my list of publications, and I knew where I was and what I was writing and teaching, but I don't have many specific memories of that period because I was so busy. Sylvia Van Kirk from the University of Toronto and I were really active in the Canadian Women's Studies Association in that decade but I can't remember the specifics, just that we helped things along. I was also trying to publish and just live a life.

CH: Do you still find that you're busy all the time?

VS: No, well, yes, look at this morning. But there's a great advantage in getting older. At your age, people do things they don't really want to do. At mine, there's very few things that people can make me do and that is really nice. On the other hand, I have far more interests than time.

CH: What areas of your life complement or impede your work?

VS: I think mothering does both these things simultaneously. It offers you practical insights into women's experiences. You might understand intellectually but real life is

especially instructive. You learn what fatigue is. And you understand what it means to be conflicted about all sorts of things. I think this makes me a better scholar. On the other hand, there's no doubt I've had much less time to work because I have three kids. I don't regret it.

CH: Are you more interested in the history of mothering since you're had children?

VS: Yes, and more interested in the history of children and in children's experience generally.

CH: What is your inspiration for doing feminist research?

VS: Social justice. It didn't start out that way. It evolved. Feminism makes sense of the world in important ways.

CH: What is your inspiration for teaching feminism?

VS: To understand and ultimately change the world, no doubt about it.

CH: How did you get involved with the Centre for Research in Women's Studies and Gender Relations? What was your experience like as director?

VS: I had been chairing women's studies up at Simon Fraser and I wasn't really looking around for another job because I've never been willing to leave British Columbia. UBC was looking for a director and they approached me and asked me to consider becoming a candidate. UBC then made me an interesting offer. They wanted to put Women's Studies on the map as part of a wider intellectual territory. It looked really exciting. Although SFU is a good school, in some ways even better than UBC, its weight in the world, its ability to have an influence on policy, is much more limited. On the other hand, UBC is enormous and getting all the pieces to move together so that something can happen is extremely difficult. I saw the Centre as a key catalyst in pulling various pieces together in ways that permitted feminist scholarship to inform policy and also link up with the community. The first four years were really exciting. I had wonderful staff. Jo Hinchliffe and Kristin Schopp, both now at Social Work, were super, super people to work with. And Gillian Creese was the undergraduate director for Women's Studies for three of those years. So for three years we had a wonderful time. Dawn Currie, who came later was also great. Then UBC had a terribly destructive situation in Political Science, which was tremendously unpleasant, in the first instance for students. It seemed to open the doors for all sorts of misogyny in the university generally. I had to deal with really nasty comments and responses from the Faculty Association, the Globe and Mail and other newspapers. It was exhausting and reminded me how much opposition there really is to equality. The resistance in some departments was really tremendous; some students were very damaged. I was getting hate mail. A woman TV evangelist attacked me as a 'daughter of Satan' and a vicious columnist in the local newspaper, *The Courier*, attacked me personally in print. It was a very difficult time. You were just angry all the time and you couldn't do much to change matters. Fortunately, UBC had an

extraordinary Dean of Graduate Studies, John Grace, who really tried to get matters straightened out.

CH: Is there anything else you want to add?

VS: I'd like to see more change, more women and men take Women's Studies. When I compare what the universities look like now and what they looked like in the past, there's just no comparison. My generation made a difference. I'd like to have done more but there's much to be proud of. Scholarship remains critical; programs can disappear, or change, or be in other people's hands but feminist scholarship is here, if not forever, at least for the long term. I also think we at UBC have made important connections to the community and paid back a little of what we owed. I might be very frustrated at times but we have some accomplishments to our credit.

\*Note: This book won a prize for best book published in 2000 with a HSS grant.