

Tribute to Florence Howe (March 17, 1929—September 12, 2020)

Janet Zandy

Florence Rosenfeld Howe was a feminist builder out of the working class. Feminism, she understood, does not exclude men. Any construction, she understood, is not a solo effort. But she also knew that someone had to break ground, build a foundation, and harness the energy of other workers. She was that determined leader.

In her Preface to *The Politics of Women's Studies: Testimony from 30 Founding Mothers*, (The Feminist Press, 2000), subtitled, 'Everyone a Heroine,' she described those foundational narratives as 'private accounts of public acts requiring imagination and intelligence as well as courage' (xi). I would add historical consciousness to those traits of imagination, intelligence, and courage to describe Florence's life work.

Florence Howe turned absence into presence. She edited at least nine books, and authored four. One of the earliest, *No More Masks!* (1973, 1993) with Ellen Bass, created spaces for women's poetic voices, some recognized, many not. Consider Muriel Rukeyser's words: *destroy the leaden heart/we've a new race to start*. Still poignant, still relevant. In her last book, a memoir, *A Life in Motion* (The Feminist Press, 2011), written and re-written, expanded and contracted, over a long period of time, Florence gave herself permission to connect the private circumstances of her working-class childhood and the public curriculum, institutional, and international edifices she built. 'Like many other women of my class, and of varying cultural and racial backgrounds,' she wrote in 1994, 'I have begun to know, I have begun to understand the potential strengths of that underclass position' (*Liberating Memory*, 336-337).



Image credit: The Feminist Press

She is known, rightly, as the Mother of Women's Studies and the founder, with Paul Lauter, of The Feminist Press, in 1970. This trajectory holds lessons for practitioners of Working-Class Studies, that is, the need to establish our own publishing outlets, and build and expand curricula at every level. She also offered models for thinking outside traditional academic frames, without pre-conceived categorization. Women's Studies, for Florence, did not contain separate boxes of race, class, and gender. She was a synthetic and analytic intellectual, an organic intellectual.

Florence had a long list of 'firsts' after her name: the first chair of the Modern Language Association (MLA)'s newly forged Commission on the Status and Education of Women, the first (since 1920) female President of the Modern Language Association (MLA). In her 1973 MLA presidential address, she spoke of 'the importance of connections between literacy and literature,' (so relevant to pedagogical concerns in Working-Class Studies), 'students become literate not simply because they can write sentences or compose paragraphs, but because they learn to write about who they are, where they come from, and where they want to go' (*A Life in Motion* 257-258).

Official obituaries will list educational affiliations and occupational histories—and these are relevant, even crucial, to summing up Florence's life. She held four honorary doctorates, and used her public persona to advance women's studies internationally. Under her leadership, The Feminist Press published *Women Writing Africa* and *Women Writing India* series, supported by Ford Foundation and Rockefeller grants. For Florence, it wasn't about publishing trends, but about recognizing knowledge and experience that have been invisible and undervalued.

Florence Howe's long life cannot, and should not, be summed up easily. Her *bildungsroman* was a process of learning, unlearning, and re-learning. To understand how she moved in time from inauspicious birth to public figure, three shaping forces should be recognized as they continued to define her:

Childhood:

*I was an unplanned baby born on March 17, 1929, nine months and one week after my penniless parents were married in Brooklyn, New York. My father had left school at age eight to work full time . . . to help support his Polish immigrant mother and two younger sisters. At the time of my birth, he was trying to eke a living from a pushcart of dry goods, but soon a fire ended that dream and he began to drive a taxi, which he did for the rest of his life. My mother's father had come from Palestine . . . and her mother from Jewish Russia. My orthodox Jewish grandfather was literate in four or five languages and made no effort to teach my illiterate grandmother any of them. He refused to allow my talented mother to consider college, instead forcing her into a commercial high school course. . . . [My mother] convinced me early that I was smart, and she taught me to value my mind, for I was to be the teacher that she could not be. Because of her, I learned the value of meaningful work, and the joy of achievement. (*Liberating Memory*, 317).*

Mississippi Freedom School:

In 1964, when I was thirty-five, I went to teach in Mississippi Freedom Summer. . . . But how could I teach in a Freedom School? What did I know that was worth teaching? . . . The Citizen Curriculum [developed by Charlie Cobb] . . . was a powerful instrument. . . . The curriculum was deliberately arranged . . . to make use of teachers' ignorance about a subject they had all experienced. We began with plumbing, an elegantly strategic choice, since all Americans might be assumed to have used plumbing, or, as it turned out, at least to have seen it. . . . On the first day, I sat with a group of fifteen middle-school students, girls and boys, and asked the questions as if I were following a catechism. The first—'What bathrooms do white people have in Mississippi?' felt strange coming out of my mouth. Then, from each student, I heard in enormous detail, the color of the tile walls, of bathtubs and toilets, of sinks with and without cupboards beneath them, even of rugs on the floor, curtain on the windows. . . .

I went on to the second [question]: 'What bathrooms do black people in Mississippi have?' The young people described outhouses very briefly, often with some embarrassment, without using that word, or simply said that they had none. The curriculum next asked 'Why?'

('From Race and Class to The Feminist Press,' Massachusetts Review, 2003: 1-19).

Tillie and Jack Olsen:

The working-class parents so different from my own. They were the first to hear the stories of my family, and the first to provide some comfort, some kindness to soothe the raw grief I could feel about my childhood miseries I always cite Tillie as responsible for the most important aspect of Feminist Press work—the gift of her 'reading list,' which led to the discovery of specific 'lost' women writers and the reshaping of the American literary curriculum. (A Life in Motion, The Feminist Press, 2011, 13.)

Personal reflection

I met Florence Howe at a Modern Language Association conference in San Francisco in 1991. Having just published *Calling Home*, I was invited to speak about working-class women's literature on a panel that included Constance Coiner, Tillie Olsen, Shelly Fisher Fishkin, and Gloria Anzaldúa. It was standing room only and a memorable moment for many. I left the room quietly, feeling quite separate from the attention that should go to others. Florence found me and asked for a copy of my paper. I said, 'it isn't very good.' She said, 'yes, it is.' It was a moment of affirmation, probably experienced by many others in their relationship with Florence, but rare for me, as I summoned my courage to bring voices of working-class women into an academic setting. This was an instance not only of

Florence's generosity, but also of her capacity to recognize the work as well as the person behind the work, and especially for those of us from the working class and the first in our immediate families to finish high school, to go to college, to become teachers.

How does Florence Howe's life and work speak to the future of Working-Class Studies? She came into feminist consciousness, developed curriculum and pedagogy, published lost writing by women, and built The Feminist Press—in collaboration and with the support of many others—but also out of the power of her conscious mind and fierce will. That emergence was concomitant with a women's movement that started in the streets, developed out of small consciousness-raising sessions, taken into classrooms, and sustained by genuine feelings of sisterhood and linkages with other women. We in Working-Class Studies do not have a street based labor movement to fuel and inform our 'studies'—yet. But we can learn from the emergence of a women's movement of the risks of being too academic, and we can learn from Black Lives Matter about the palpability of economic and racial injustice. The women's marches, that I knew well, were called 'Take Back the Night.' How can we take back the language of jobs and work and patriotism, usurped by the powerful, who care nothing for working class and poor people? How can we own Tillie Olsen's 'Strong with the not yet in the now' ('Tell Me a Riddle,' 109)?



Image credit: Janet Zandy

Author Bio

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