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Eileen Boris reflects on a career shaping feminist studies at UCSB

For Eileen Boris, who has served as the Hull Professor of Feminist Studies at UC Santa Barbara for 25 years, retirement is on the horizon. At least technically. As a practical matter, however, she remains busy on book projects and prepping for her final quarter of teaching this spring. Also, earlier this month, Boris became president of the Labor and Working Class History Association (LAWCHA), a nonprofit founded in the late 1990s to promote labor and working class studies.

“Many have heard me declare that I have only two topics, home and work — and they are the same,” Boris said recently. “Onward!”

Described as a backbone of feminist studies at UCSB, Boris helped build the department into “the international powerhouse it is today,” said department chair Jane Ward, adding that the Hull position was the first endowed chair in the field across the UC system.

The daughter of working class parents who paid the bills with an ice cream truck and vending machines, Boris noticed early on how her mother headed up bookkeeping and undertook home repairs while taking care of the family simultaneously. This instilled in Boris a healthy respect for the numerous and critical roles women play in families and workplaces. And, Ward added, these early lessons of power “showing up clearly in the everyday labor people are expected to perform, often without recognition, runs like a throughline from her activism and into the scholarship that so many of us (in the field) rely on.”

“Over the course of her prolific and field-making career, Eileen has been a troublemaker in the very best sense of the word,” Ward said. “Her scholarship has troubled the boundaries of disciplines, as her contributions span the fields of history, labor studies, American studies, feminist and gender studies, Black studies and global studies. She has an extraordinary ability to bring scholars into conversation across fields, generations and borders.”

The Current caught up with Boris recently to discuss early influences, more work ahead and her reflections on Women’s History Month.

Besides your observations of the family business, what influenced you early on?

I grew up in a very liberal and educationally valued community in Newton, Massachusetts, which had one of the best school systems in the country at the time. So when I took AP history in high school, it was really good. But even earlier, I had teachers that encouraged me.

I only became smart in third or fourth grade, when they introduced social studies to the curriculum. I would do average in English, but once they included social studies, I would be getting “rapids” — it was progressive education, so we didn't get grades. I got "slow" in spelling, but once my interest was captured, I became smart.

In my first year at Boston University, in the honors program, I had some excellent and very supportive teachers. Historian Arnold Ofner, with whom I did my senior thesis, told me, "If you're going to be a historian, you have to work in archives.” He sent me off to the BU archives. I was doing a joint degree in American history and English, looking at writers who were active in the Great Depression. It was a creative interdisciplinary project, I would say.

That interdisciplinary approach extended to your early women’s studies work.

Yes, but before I got to grad school, I wasn't that involved in women's liberation per se. I was involved in the left, but I remember marching in August of 1970 in the demonstration that ended up in Boston Commons to celebrate the 50-year anniversary of women's suffrage, and I picked up all sorts of literature. When I got to grad school, I essentially wrote all my big papers on women. I did my major on

women in America.

My thesis director John L. Thomas was quite supportive. He was kind of a crusty New England ornery radical. He was great friends with (UCSB emeritus history professor) Mary Furner, by the way. That's how I met Mary many, many years ago.

I was at Brown for my PhD and was involved in teaching the first women's studies class there. The effort was led by assistant professors in English and anthropology and sociology, and we did it under the interdisciplinary studies rubric.

What brought you to UCSB?

Someone told me to apply for the Hull Chair in Women and Social Justice. It was a new chair, and they hadn't filled it. And I have to say, my spouse (UCSB history professor emeritus Nelson Lichtenstein) got his PhD from Berkeley and he always wanted to get back to California. We liked California, but it was also a real opportunity. As I would be doing all these things, the joke in our household was, "Why are you doing all that?" And I would say, “It all adds up." And it did, this integration of scholarship and activism.

You've been writing a lot. What about?

I am co-authoring a book with two sociologists, Ruth Milkman of CUNY (City University of New York) and Heidi Gottfried, who's recently retired from Wayne State University.

We were part of a six-country team that got a transatlantic platform greenlight for a project on care after COVID. As the U.S. team we decided we would launch our own study of homecare workers. Home healthcare is one of the fastest rising occupations in the country because people want to age in place. But it's one of the lower-wage jobs because it's associated with domestic workers and immigrant women of color. We were particularly interested in what we call the gray economy—people who are paid directly, often in cash, as independent contractors.We launched a survey through Facebook and Instagram and got over 5,000 responses after we cleaned the data. Then we conducted approximately a little over a hundred interviews in English, Spanish, Tagalog, Russian and Chinese. We wanted workers who were not particularly attached to NGOs like the National Domestic Workers Alliance or trade unions like 1199 in New York or United Domestic Workers/AFSCME in this region.

What's striking to me is how little has changed in the way in which the workers talk about the work. The work hasn't changed that much because despite dreams of robots, you can't make it automatic. It's a relational economy.

And the other book?

It’s my own historical project, a micro history of a 1947 slavery case called U.S. versus Ingalls that took place in San Diego. It’s a book about intimate labor in the home, about relations between a mistress and a maid and the meaning of freedom. The tentative title is “Freeing Dora: The 1947 slavery case that fractured a family and shocked the nation.”

Under the 13th Amendment, Elizabeth Ingalls was convicted by a jury of trafficking her maid, Dora Jones, from New England to California. She hadn't paid Jones for almost 40 years.

Any goals at LAWCHA in your new role as president?

My goal as president is to really expand what we mean by what is work and who is a worker. We are a scholarly professional organization; we defend academic freedom and the rights of workers. We're in solidarity with trade unions and other formations.

Anything you’d like to add, particularly in the context of Women's History Month?

Women's History Month is a product of that 1970s women's movement, and it reflects the successes and the challenges of a movement that takes questions from the present and tries to find answers in the past.

There's a tendency with all of these history months to look at worthy or famous people and events — but there's bigger themes. The kinds of women I have studied are those who are often left out, such as household workers of all types, mother workers, and poor women on social assistance, for example. Now the project has expanded to femmes and gender queer and trans people, that is overall gender diversity.

Women's history is important because it is history, central to the making of public, private, and all of social and political life. Women are both a trope and a representation, but also real people. And without the labor that has been assigned to those we recognize as women in the sexual division of labor in the past — the work

of cooking, cleaning and caring — there would be no social life.

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