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Linda C. McClain

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## An Institute of One's Own: Polly Bunting's "Messy Experiment" of Helping Women Navigate Work-Family Conflict

Author : Linda C. McClain

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Maggie Doherty, [\*The Equivalents: A Story of Art, Female Friendship, and Liberation in the 1960s\*](#) (2021).

In 1960, Mary ("Polly") Ingraham Bunting, newly-appointed President of Radcliffe College, wrote an essay for *The New York Times Magazine* to encourage applications to the new Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study. In the essay, Bunting connected the Institute's goal of ending the "waste of highly talented, educated womanpower" to helping women as well as to better realizing America's "heritage" and "aspirations." The Institute would help "intellectually displaced women"—mothers whose homemaking and childcare responsibilities had interrupted their careers—get back on track through a financial stipend of up to \$3,000, access to Harvard's library resources, a private office, and formal and informal exchange.

As Maggie Doherty recounts in her engaging book, [\*The Equivalents: A Story of Art, Female Friendship, and Liberation in the 1960s\*](#), Bunting, a microbiologist and educator, first conceived this "messy experiment" in "a national war room populated almost entirely by men": she served on a Cold War-era committee formed by the National Science Foundation after the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik to study education in the U.S. and steer more resources and students into science and engineering. (Pp. 58-59.) Publicity for the Institute echoed Cold War rhetoric about the national risk of not utilizing women's talents, but also stressed the risk to families and marriages: "This sense of stagnation can become a malignant factor even in the best of marriages . . . when the gifted woman must spend her time inventing ways to employ herself mentally and failing, or only half-succeeding, may turn against the marriage itself in sheer frustration." (P. 68.) If this rhetoric brings to mind Betty Friedan's famous articulation of "the problem that has no name," in *The Feminine Mystique*, it may be because Bunting and Friedan initially planned to collaborate on the book. However, the collaboration ended because Bunting resisted Friedan's approach of viewing the dynamic "in terms of men against women," instead of (as Bunting perceived it) a "climate of unexpectation" about women's roles "in which both men and women were trapped": that women could not have both family and career so that any pursuit of intellectual goals would be at a cost to their personal lives. (Pp. 63, 65.) Bunting viewed the Institute as a way to change that climate. (P. 63.)

Doherty argues that the Radcliffe Institute's emergence is a "crucial and yet often overlooked event in the history of American feminism," which sometimes treats *The Feminine Mystique* as the launching point of second-wave feminism and the prior decade as a "dead zone for liberation politics." (P. xviii) Instead, efforts by "women reformers, educators, and artists of the 1950s and early 1960s" helped to lay "the groundwork for feminist revolt"—even though many of those women viewed themselves as neither revolutionaries nor feminists. (P. xix.) Referencing Virginia Woolf's famous *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Woolf's imagining a world in which generations of generous female benefactors had (similar to their male counterparts) left money "to found fellowships and lectureships and prizes and scholarships appropriated to the use of their own sex," Doherty observes: "The Institute made Woolf's supposition into something real." (Pp. xix-xx.)

The Institute provided the crucial resource of time away from caring for home and children. Drawing on her own experience of combining motherhood with laboratory research (in a relatively egalitarian marriage to a husband who was the primary earner), Bunting believed both that most women desired to combine family life with professional life and could do so with the right supports. Bunting envisioned that the Institute would provide "a place to work free from the unpredictable distractions of family life, the compulsion to pursue the daily routine at the expense of a half-finished conception or dream, and the guilt over children rebuffed, or questions unanswered." (P. 70.) Bunting believed that this

small group of female scholars could inspire Radcliffe undergraduates, but also inspire other colleges to adopt similar programs. (P. 65.)

To show the Institute's impact on the women it supported, Doherty focuses on the friendships, artistic creations, and careers of five writers and artists who were "associate scholars" at the Institute during 1961-1963, its first two years: poets and close friends Maxine Kumin and Anne Sexton, painter Barbara Swan, sculptor Marianna Pineda, and writer Tillie Olsen. These five called themselves "the Equivalents" because their applications had to demonstrate that they had the "equivalent" to a doctorate through "success in an artistic field." (Pp. xvi, 57.) Drawing on archival material, Doherty recreates an otherwise "lost world" that is engaging, illuminating, poignant, and sometimes tragic (in the case of Sexton, who took her life in 1974). Family law and gender law scholars and teachers will find rich nuggets to help convey what marriage, family, and work/family conflict looked like prior to the "gender revolution" spurred on in part by the Supreme Court's shift to a more skeptical look at laws classifying by sex throughout the 1970s. Feminist and Critical Race scholars will appreciate Doherty's insights about the initial whiteness of the Institute and the implicit race and class assumptions about its likely applicants.

The vital role the Institute served in providing space and money for the Equivalents and other talented women is made evident from Doherty's sketch of the "ambient" misogyny in the late 1950's world of poetry, when Sexton and Kumin, along with Sylvia Plath, sat in the classroom of poet Robert Lowell at Boston University. (Pp. 22-27.) Lowell divided writers into two categories, "major" and "minor;" "almost every female poet was a 'minor' writer, with a few exceptions." (P. 28.) Further, when the Institute opened its doors in 1961, full coeducation at Harvard and other traditionally male-only Ivy League Schools was controversial and years away. The Institute's woman-centered world, by comparison, provided "the Equivalents" and their colleagues the opportunity to hold seminars to discuss their work.

Among the first class of 24 women, the "vast majority" had children. There was only one single woman, Alma Wittlin, an educational psychologist. Doherty reports: "it was a rare thing to be a single woman in 1960—only 8 percent of women over twenty-five had never been married—and it was not easy," given "social convention." (P. 93.) There were no women of color in the Institute's first class of scholars: they were "white, well-off, and except Sexton, highly educated," although from diverse disciplines. (P. 92.) As Doherty observes, a program "pitched as part-time employment" did not have in its purview the needs of women who were full-time (underpaid) wage-earners eager for financial assistance or child care. (P. 69.) Doherty suggests that imagery of avoiding "stagnation" and taking "initiative" reflected a "default white perspective" that would have seemed inapt to many Black women. By comparison to White women, in the 1950s, the number of Black professional women was increasing—outpacing Black men, proportionally—and "upwardly mobile" Black women faced different challenges in combining work and performing domesticity. (Pp. 69-70.) The selection committee did not explicitly consider either race or economic circumstances. Nor was there comment on the racial dynamics of the care economy that "facilitate[ed] female creativity": "stipends . . . often passed from the white women receiving Radcliffe's largesse to women of color, who provided child care and household help so that scholars could work." (P. 264.)

Of the five "Equivalents," Tillie Olsen, the most "politically conscious—and politically active," was "unnerved" by the Institute's whiteness. Her time at the Institute helped to germinate her later book *Silences*, about how the various obstacles women writers experienced contributed to their comparative absence; her working-class background led her to champion neglected working-class female writers as well as women of color. By the second half of the 1960s, as Black female students at Radcliffe protested for "increased racial representation," the Institute also "diversified its group of associate scholars," beginning in 1966, with playwright and novelist Alice Childress. (Pp. 264-65.) In 1971-73, while at the Institute, 27-year old Alice Walker worked on her novel *Meridian* and discovered and began championing Zora Neale Hurston. Olsen and Walker, who became correspondents, shared a commitment to researching and teaching women writers missing from the canon. In what became her essay, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South*, Walker turned to Woolf's *A Room of One Own* to ask about the "genius" that must have existed among "enslaved people and among the wives and daughters of sharecroppers." (P. 276.)

By examining the lives of "the Equivalents" before the Institute, Doherty powerfully conveys how the demands of

mothering—and, in Olsen’s case, wage-earning—took them away from their art, even as they often made women’s bodies, motherhood, children, and the emotional rhythms of family life the subject of their poetry, painting, and sculpture. (P. 146.) Their time at the Institute would open doors for new opportunities and new funding, as well as greater legitimacy of this artistic focus on the personal.

The Institute ceased to exist as a woman-only program in 1999, when Harvard and Radcliffe merged and Radcliffe’s existence as a separate college ended. The well-funded successor was the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, open to women and men. Doherty ponders whether the need for such women-only spaces had ended by then, noting conflicting reactions, including a recollection of the “magic” and “comfortable community” of the all-female Institute. (P. 310.) Doherty persuasively concludes that the “most important” insight of Bunting, Friedan, Walker, and “the five Equivalentents” was that “women’s creative and intellectual lives are shaped by their material conditions and that those conditions must change if women are to be the artists, the writers, the mothers, and the minds that they want to be.” (P. 315.) While “a women-only space like the Institute might not be right for the twenty-first century, a time when the gender binary is increasingly challenged,” Doherty argues for adapting the Institute’s approach to the present day, asking how educational and other institutions could “better support women” and “work to eradicate gender disparities.” (P. 315.) She issues a call for “another messy experiment.” It’s a call worth heeding.

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