Remembering the life and works of Jackie Louise Byars: 1951-2020

It is with deep sadness that we mourn the loss of Jackie Byars who passed away in Austin on the 5th of December, 2020 after an extended illness. In this time of grieving, we take heart in remembering her vibrant intellect and enormous generosity of spirit as a colleague, mentor, and friend.

Born on January 4, 1951, in Harlingen, Texas, to Charline Ann and Jesse Samuel Byars, Jackie grew up in La Feria, Texas, and graduated from La Feria High School in 1969. She earned her Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctoral degrees from the University of Texas at Austin, the latter in 1983. Dr. Byars held a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania and faculty positions at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Texas Christian University, and St. Mary’s College of California before joining the Department of Communication at Wayne State University in Detroit in 1994. Author of scholarly articles and book chapters and of the monograph *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950’s Melodrama* (University of North Carolina Press, 1991), Professor Byars was professionally active as a conference speaker and at Wayne State where she served as Director of the Women’s Studies Program, Co-Director of the Film Studies Program, Area Head for Media Arts and Studies, and as mentor to over 35 graduate students whose essays, theses, and dissertations she supervised. While still teaching, she earned a Master of Landscape Architecture degree from the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor. She retired from Wayne State University as an Associate Professor in 2011.

Jackie Byars’ major contributions as a consummate scholar-teacher were realized through her commitment to feminism and feminist scholarship--film-related and beyond. “As I progressed through graduate school in the late 1970s and early 1980s, my politics determined the direction of my research and writing,” she wrote. Publishing by invitation in the *Camera Obscura* issue on “The Spectatrix” (1989), she elaborated:

I decided to write my dissertation on the representation of gender and determined that Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s presented a fascinating case study because the period was one of significant social change for women in the United States and because these films directly address the formation of “appropriately” gendered social subjects.

Then, with characteristic relish: “I also enjoyed the films and wanted to think more thoroughly about my attraction to them.”

Byars’ gimlet-eyed book, *All That Heaven Allows*, pursued questions of feminism and film theory in relation to wider historical and sociocultural conditions that she regarded as integral and necessary to the analysis, and are widely regarded as such today. Byars takes the position that none of the existing theoretically-informed approaches is “singularly adequate” to
comprehending a textually inscribed “spectating subject” who is also an historical viewer multiplied many times over by collective and unique experiences. Her discussion of the varieties of psychoanalytically-informed feminist film theory -- no doubt enriched by her year of study in the renowned Paris Film Program -- is marvelously lucid and attuned to key debates and internal contradictions. Her opposite discussion of social history explores women’s employment, notions of motherhood and 1950s consumerism, and wartime and postwar politics. The book is explicit when concentrating on white women and middle-class women and critical of the mainstream cultural elision of women of color and working-class women -- aware of intersectionality as the term was first coming into use.

In making her original intervention, Byars resists the “tired” duality between unconscious desires and social formations and calls for a “materialist psychoanalysis.” “Freudian and Lacanian theories of psychoanalysis,” she teaches, may well explain “the majority of Hollywood films” but they fail to account for “the significant minority of films that focus on female experience.” In her own words:

I examine film texts, looking for their internal contradictions and for the (potential) presence of strong feminist voices that resist patriarchal dominance. I examine struggle.

Re-reading Jackie Byars’ own re-readings of gender and its construction in Hollywood melodrama is a deeply enriching experience that revivifies debates of the time when knowledge about the relationship between psychic and social processes felt very hard-won, and complications ensued. Indeed, as film and media scholarship has made its social, regulatory, spatial, and infrastructural “turns,” and while many of us hold to infrastructural media’s semiotic and affectual as well as material aspects, Byars’ commitment to in-depth theoretical and representational analysis illuminates and abides.

Another sustained interest that Byars developed is that of production culture in the film and television industries. Her chapter on “The Prime of Ms. Kim Novak: Struggling Over the Feminist in the Star Image,” published in Joel Foreman’s The Other 50s: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons (1997), builds on stardom literature to explore how studio star-making practices (e.g. casting decisions by Harry Cohn at Columbia) and Novak’s own performances “foregrounded tensions over gender construction, rather than masking them.” Marilyn Pauline Novak as “the star image known as Kim Novak,” Byars argues, slipped the stays of normative gender roles and, interestingly for Byars’ reading but to the detriment of Novak’s career, “expressed not ideological coherence but contradiction.”

Jackie was a fan of television and a member of the Console-ing Passions community, known for her lively presentations during the 1990s at the group’s Conference on Feminism and Television. She embraced television programs with women protagonists whose on-screen performance of personal lives were recognizable from life experience, particularly stories in which women navigated relationships, family, and careers. Here too, her feminism, politics, and media studies intersected in her scholarly work which she described as “autobiographically
motivated.” Her research interest in the multiple unique perspectives of female spectatorship carried over into commercial spaces and addressed the complexity of the corporate co-option of women’s experience. In the article “Telefeminism: How Lifetime Got Its Groove, 1984-1997,” Byars and co-author Eileen Meehan examined corporate programming practices, tracing the origins and development of Lifetime’s television for women formula. Finding storylines about women’s concerns being cultivated as part of Lifetime’s engagement with liberal feminist organizations, they offer a critique of the formulaic nature of this content targeted to upscale women, attributing to it a kind of co-optation of the women characters and feminist organizations both, even while recognizing that women viewers -- Jackie herself, avowedly -- found something of genuine value in these stories. Returning to Jackie’s statement of positionality and her feminist approach to her work, she says, “the term ‘female spectator’ is useful…but so are references to race, class, age, sexual preference, education and so on,” thus identifying a complex intersectionality of culture, commerce, and lived experience that constitutes female spectatorship.

Adding to this tribute, Professor Eileen Meehan recalls that, “Jackie Byars was truly an outstanding cultural researcher: a careful listener, viewer, and observer; an excellent interviewer, analyst, and theorist. Our field is poorer with her passing.”

“I examine struggle.” In her academic institutional life as well, Professor Byars contributed to the enhancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion. She was the first woman to be hired on the tenure track in her Department of Communication at Wayne State and the first woman to be granted tenure. In his tribute at the time of her death, departmental colleague and Dean of the College of Fine, Performing, and Communication Arts Matthew Seeger beautifully captured Jackie’s verve and the strength and breadth of her impact. He wrote, “a tenacious mentor for doctoral students studying film, a powerful voice among the faculty and a strong advocate for media studies…..She was very good at speaking truth and she pushed us to be a more inclusive department.”

As scholars, our professional accomplishments are regularly catalogued. However, what often goes unseen is the commitment that many academics have to the success of their undergraduate and graduate students. Jackie’s commitment in this regard was outstanding and mentorship one of her greatest passions. During her tenure at Wayne State, and with unflagging energy near the end of her career, Jackie convened a regular monthly writers group for a small cadre of graduate students. We, Debbie and Chris, were privileged to be a part of this group for several years. Each month, Jackie had us to her home where we would discuss and critique one of our pieces of writing. Afterwards, we ate a potluck dinner, with Jackie and her partner Carl providing the main course, and the conversation expanded to everything from media to food to travel. Carl Michel, to whom Jackie’s book is dedicated, was just as instrumental to surviving the insanity of graduate school. Even though Jackie retired from full-time teaching in 2011, she continued to mentor us as we completed our doctorates in succession and continued to attend the SCMS conference for several years. I, Christopher, continued to maintain a close friendship with Jackie and Carl for several years after finishing my PhD. When I went through a
divorce, Jackie and I had many conversations late into the night about the challenges of academic relationships. As I now live outside of Michigan, I made regular visits back to see family and Jackie and I would always meet up during these trips, usually at Zingerman’s Deli in Ann Arbor where our conversations inevitably revolved around food and cooking. Our last lunch was in March of 2020 as the pandemic gripped the world. When I told Jackie that I had been granted tenure and was active in statewide union work, she smiled and whispered, “very good.”

As one of the last members to join Jackie’s cohort of PhD students in 2006, I, Debbie, remember receiving the call to join the Communication program at Wayne State University and the moment I met Jackie for the first time at a department welcome luncheon. I was awed by the strength of her presence, her forthright questions about what I expected to achieve in the program, and, over the next five years, her patience with me as an advisee. The stresses and challenges of coursework and qualifying exams have faded with time but not the constant support and encouragement from Jackie. Many instances of advice stand out. Two that were instrumental in my joining academia include Jackie’s gentle insistence that I spend two years of my assistantship gaining television production skills and experience with Wayne State Television to broaden my opportunities on the market. Secondly, while a member of her writing group, and when it was my turn to bring a manuscript concerning the intersection of documentary and human rights to the group for feedback, she remarked, “Debbie, this looks like a worthy dissertation thesis topic.” From that moment, not only my dissertation but also what I was struggling to figure out in terms of who I was as a researcher, began to fall into place. These two themes continue to guide my teaching and research. But, perhaps most importantly, Jackie’s straightforward and generous mentoring shaped my approach to teaching and student mentorship. I will miss receiving the yearly New Year’s card from Jackie and Carl and the fellowship of the writing group.

Another one of her graduate students, Dr. Nicholas Schlegel of Alfred University shared the following remembrance: The world of film and media studies was dealt a major blow at the end of 2020. It was with great sadness that I learned that my academic advisor, mentor, and dear friend, Jackie Byars passed away earlier this winter. In the atmospheric weather system of film and television studies, Jackie’s impact hit with the force of a hurricane gale. Her loyalty, leadership, initiative, knowledge, wisdom, foresight, management of her advisees, and effortless ability to apply Occam’s Razor to any complex situation (practical or academic) were entirely unique—and so highly valued. Jackie, and her surviving husband Carl, had a time-honored tradition of opening their home and their kitchen to her many grateful graduate students. We would break bread over excellent potluck, evaluate each other’s work, and bond over our collective and shared experiences as we proceeded through our doctoral degrees. My last, and as it turns out, most memorable meeting with Jackie and Carl occurred during a visit to my new institution in Upstate New York, Alfred University. I couldn’t wait to “show off” Jackie to my colleagues. Afterward, when I insisted on taking them out for a fine meal, they took me out instead. Jackie, in particular, and throughout that wonderful day, commented that this was indeed the perfect place for me. She added that she was so happy for me, and yes, proud of me
(praise from Jackie was always hard-earned and therefore significant). Fortunately, she knew, because I reminded her often, that none of it would have been possible without her.

As a third co-writer of this tribute, I, Janet, would also like to express my everlasting gratitude to Jackie -- and claim membership in the group of her mentees, harkening back in time. One day in February of 1994, Jackie called me in California to invite me for a job interview in her department. No doubt she was mainly responsible for my hire, and I loved being on the faculty at Wayne State University and being her colleague. Jackie and Carl hosted me while I house hunted prior to the move, and I also enjoyed many farm-to-table dinners at their home. Quite simply said, it is unclear whether I would be the person known as Professor Janet Walker if not for Jackie’s support and brilliant colleagueship. Jackie was a great and interested conversationalist. We would talk into the night. I miss those conversations and wonder what she would have had to say about Judy (2019), eponymously played by Renée Zellweger, if we could have sat down together one more time. Long after I was too tired to form a coherent sentence, Jackie would finally come to the point of saying, “I'm fading.” Carl can attest.

Reflecting on her Landscape Architecture studies, Jackie often remarked that the program’s coursework and the restoration of native plant species in her own backyard gave her a much needed and meaningful creative outlet. I, Debbie, did not fully understand her deep commitment to this work until I began to visit her and Carl’s home in Ann Arbor for the monthly writing group meetings. On warm Sunday evenings we would stand on the patio of their home looking out over her carefully designed riot of native shrubs, grasses and wildflowers combined into a human and nature sanctuary. The garden was a manifestation of her practice and commitment to a more communal relationship with nature, serving as a respite for Jackie and Carl as they enjoyed their morning coffee and music, the birds, butterflies, and insects.

May Jackie Byars’ deep knowledge and personal generosity live on through her readers, colleagues, students, mentees, friends, and family; may the memory of her vital presence continue undimmed.

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