Elizabeth Ewen, interviewed by Carol Quirke in New York, New York, on November 9, 2011.

Carol Quirke: My name is Carol Quirke and I am interviewing Liz Ewen on November 9, 2011 about the history of SUNY Old Westbury and the American Studies Department. So Liz, I wanted to start with your early life. I am wondering if you could tell me about your parents, about the neighborhood you grew up in, etc.

Elizabeth Ewen: I actually grew up in Long Island, not far from Old Westbury. First, in a place called New Hyde Park. My father had played poker during the Second World War and won enough money to put a down payment on a house. That's where we lived at first.

Then we moved to Great Neck. Now Great Neck is mainly a Jewish community, but we lived in the more Christian part. There was lots of tension between the dominant Jewish presence and the Christians. But my father and mother had met in an American Labor Party dance in the late 1930s. My father was kind of an anarchist, who had been thrown out of college at Amherst for burning an American flag and he did lots of other things. So anyway, he was an iconoclast.

I grew up in this family where my mother and father were constantly discussing, arguing, combating each other. I also was born with cerebral palsy. My parents, especially my father decided, number one, and it was also McCarthyism, so he needed somebody to talk to. He made me his project. He was going to make me, so I would be what's called "mainstream." So he educated me and he exercised me to death. I say he was the main intellectual influence of my early childhood. He loved history.

Quirke: Were there any experiences that you had as a younger person either in your family or where you grew up? It sounds as if your family gave you a political consciousness. Were there any experiences where you individually sort of encountered, or came to, or grew in your political consciousness?

Ewen: Yeah, I think having cerebral palsy and having people call you names all the time, or stare at you gave me a sense of what it meant to be an outsider. So I identified with other people who were marginal. I had a number of experiences like that. I went on early, early, small civil rights things in high school. I also went in high school to these anti-nuclear testing rallies in Madison Square Garden. When Pete Seeger was on trial, I had a teacher in high school who took us to the trial. Which is pretty amazing. So I was ready.

Quirke: Okay. Did that politics make you unusual in the high school in which you were at? Or the grammar school in which you were at?

Ewen: This is high school. Yeah, it made me slightly unusual. But I was unusual to begin with. I was Christian. I walked with a limp. But there were a small number of, people used to call them, beatniks. I don't know what we were. There was a small group of people.

There was this man; I don't know if you've heard of him, he has been covered recently in the *New York Times*. His name was Professor Irwin Corey. He is now about ninety. He was a comedian. He and his wife had a house in Great Neck. Where all the bohemian kids would hang out, drink, smoke cigarettes, and stay up all night. So that was pretty cool.

Quirke: Can you tell me what made you, as a high school student, decide to go from Long Island to the University of Wisconsin? And could you tell us a little bit about your activism in your college years and graduate school years?

Ewen: I decided to go to Wisconsin for a couple of reasons. One was, that this friend of mine who was a year older and who was there told me—now this is really ridiculous—that there was a lot of cute boys in Madison. So that attracted me. Secondly, it was relatively easy to get in and my grades weren't great and the tuition was reasonable. Third, I knew that it had a lot of radicals like me there. So that's what attracted me.

Quirke: And radicals at that point meant mostly civil rights or were there…

Ewen: [05:50] No, there were civil rights. There were socialists. There were communists. There were Trotskyites. There were Progressive Labor types. There were SANE nuclear policies. It was very densely political. There were Marxist study groups. And I had a number of professors who were—particularly in the history department—who were very knowledgeable but also taught history that at that point nobody knew about.

Quirke: Could you be more specific about what you mean by that?

Ewen: Well, one of them taught the history of—European intellectual history—but from the vantage point of criticism, not of just pure admiration. And another one, whose name was Harvey Goldberg, taught a course called "Revolution," which covered seventeen revolutions all around the globe. When I took a course also from him called the French Revolution, which was day-by-day movement of the people and the changing of their ideas. It was quite an experience to be there.

But what the teachers were teaching extended into the community because there were organizations, there were study groups; I was in a Marxist study group. I was in one of the first feminist study groups, where we read Simone de Beauvoir. So it was a kind of cutting-edge place. And plus, there were also all of these demonstrations that were happening.

The first demonstration I remember was for the Test Ban Treaty of 1960. We had a demonstration, and all these fraternity kids came down with sort of baseball bats and they kept saying, "Go back to Russia. Go back to Russia." So it was a very politicized environment. And then the civil rights movement came along.

I remember we organized this huge sit-in in the shoe department in Sears Roebuck because it wasn't integrated. We would have people—a black person and a white person go up to buy some shoes. They wouldn't sell the shoes to the black person and then we would dump all the shoes on the ground and run away. And then, you know there was Selma, there were all of these civil rights protests, and then the war. So by 1965 we were having vigils, we were having demonstrations and SDS was organized.

Quirke: Can I ask you two sorts of related questions? You talked about the professors that you took who were looking at let's say the French Revolution from the standpoint of what people were doing each day. Was there intellectually a word for, today what would be called history from the bottom of, New Left history, etc? Did people know there were doing something really different? Did the professors know they were doing something really different?

Ewen: [09:57] There weren't words for it. "History from the Bottom Up" had yet to be written, this article by Jesse Lemisch. But these were people who always were in the kind of vanguard of left history. The president of the college then hired these people. He hired Harvey Goldberg to teach European and world revolution. He hired William Appleman Williams who was this very important figure in the critique of American foreign policy. He hired this guy George Mosse who is also very important in terms of the beginnings of the critique of the European intellectual tradition. And also the introduction of students to people that we had never heard of but who turned out to be very important.

Wisconsin was known as a very progressive history department and it also was very large. So those words, those concepts, came out of what these people were teaching but they didn't speak that language yet.

Quirke: You said that both the professor and the sort of activities that you were engaged in sometimes connected outside the university. You talked about study groups but you also said organizations. You spoke of that wonderful action of dropping the shoes on the floor. Was that through SNCC or was that a more indigenous Madison organization?

Ewen: It was more indigenous. One of the things about Madison was that we didn't have national organizations. We had local organizations. And when these people, for example, came to organize an SDS chapter from New York we started our own and threw them out. We didn't like national organization and the imposition of their politics. Not like we weren't in line with them, but no.

Quirke: You have told me in earlier conversations that you were active in SDS. Can you speak to that briefly?

Ewen: Yeah, SDS was a very vibrant, alive, contentious organization. Very activist; it was very male-dominated during this period of time.

Quirke: What period of time are we talking about exactly? Like what years?

Ewen: I'd say '65 to '68, '69. And in 1967 the Dow Chemical Company came to recruit students on campus and they had produced napalm. The local SDS chapter organized a sit-in that actually got busted by the police and people were very badly beaten up. So that was kind of the real beginning of the activism as a mass movement, not just as a small movement.

Quirke: And you worked on both sides of that time window, is that correct?

Ewen: Yes.

Quirke: Liz, we were talking about your involvement in SDS and I was curious, this is from an earlier conversation and I think because I am from Chicago. I am interested, you said that you did ERAP, in Chicago, I believe at one point in time.

Ewen: CORE.

Quirke: So can you talk to us a little bit about that?

Ewen: [14:03] Well it was during Mississippi Freedom Summer. But instead of going to Mississippi I went to the Near North Side of Chicago and participated in this Congress of Racial Equality attempt to organize the community over a variety of different issues: from garbage collection, to voting rights, to participation in local politics. The Daley Machine went after us all the time. It was pretty intense.

Quirke: So they went after you, i.e. the police?

Ewen: The police came all the time. Once we found a bunch of—this is really weird—refrigerators on the back lawn of this Freedom House that had just been planted there as if they had been stolen. Then the police came and busted the house and said we had stolen them when we had been asleep.

Quirke: I'm curious, was there any connection between this CORE organization and some of the Alinsky style organizations that had been active in Chicago? Or did they not speak to one another?

Ewen: I think they spoke to—there was much more connection between this CORE and this man named Father Groppi in Milwaukee who was a militant organizer, Catholic. He organized tons of young African-Americans who he then sent to Chicago to learn how to organize. But I don't remember so much Alinsky.

Quirke: So you spent the summer there doing this?

Ewen: Well, a lot of the summer.

Quirke: Were you married to your husband Stuart Ewen at this point in time?

Ewen: No, I was married to a man named Gene Dennis, whose father had been the head of the American Communist Party.

Quirke: I was trying to locate you vis-à-vis Stuart. What year was this? Do you know?

Ewen: When I worked in the CORE, '64.

Quirke: I'm going to switch gears just slightly and move us towards Old Westbury. How did you decide to pursue a PhD and become a professor? I would love it if you were interested in talking at all about what it meant to be a female professor at that point in time.

Ewen: First of all, I met Stuart when he got off—he had been in the South in Mississippi. He went to march in Selma, Alabama and the bus got diverted to Washington. But when he came back we were like part of the support group and I met him there. Then we went to this vigil against the war. So that's when I met him.

Quirke: So like in '64, or '65?

Ewen: Yeah. Okay, when I went to college I had one female professor whose name was Germaine Bree, who was the mistress of Albert Camus and who I took French courses with. But she was the only female professor I ever had. I also, because of my disability, realized that [this was] the only thing I could really do and also, I kind of had the gift of gab from my dad. The only thing that was realistic for me to do was to teach in college. I knew that from high school, so I always had this desire.

I didn't realize that there weren't too many other women who were interested in this. Feminism was just really, really early. So when I first went to graduate school I was the only woman in these seminars filled with men. It was very awkward at times. I had a professor who listened to me, who was very helpful and supportive of me. But the rest of them didn't seem to care. Then, I got pregnant, so I dropped out of graduate school for a while. I didn't go back until…when? I left Wisconsin. We went to the University of Rochester. I think I wrote my dissertation without taking too many graduate courses.

I worked with this historian named Herbert Gutman, now in New York, on this oral history project of immigrant men and women in their nineties and eighties for a semester. That got me re-interested in going back, and writing a dissertation on this material. And so simultaneously I wanted a job, a real job. This was a part-time job. Stuart was teaching at Empire State and we had two kids and we had just moved into this apartment. It was '73 or '74. The rent was five hundred dollars, which to us seemed astronomical. So, I had known Ros Baxendall from the past and actually from when I lived in Boston. There was an opening at Old Westbury. She and this guy Paul Lauter came to interview me and I went to Old Westbury for a day. I fell in love. It was mutual. And they hired me.

Quirke: Can you clarify the sort of time range then? So you're starting your PhD program in the late sixties?

Ewen: Yeah, I started in Madison.

Quirke: In '66, '67?

Ewen: I think '66. I think I stayed for about maybe a year. Then I took all incompletes.

Quirke: Who was the professor who was supportive?

Ewen: His name is William Taylor. He is an American historian. He has written a lot of books. He moved from Madison to Stony Brook, which is where I got my PhD, mainly because of him. Then I just dropped out. Stuart was working on his dissertation. In the mean time, we had met; we were very active in politics. These professors came, this man named Herbert Gutman and this other man named Warren Susman. They came to give lectures at Wisconsin. Their work was really interesting and exciting. So in '68 we decided

to move to Rochester, which is where not only Gutman was, but also this man named Loren Baritz was. So we moved to Rochester.

Quirke: And that's when you started up the oral histories that you were doing with Italian immigrants primarily, was it?

Ewen: [23:00] No, at that time I was working. First, I was working on this project, that ultimately was a book for Gutman called *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*. And we were reading manuscript censuses from the 1870's. Then actually I think I went back to graduate school. Then we moved to Albany because the history department at Rochester broke up over political tensions.

The people in, we had put on, we had given a pig's head to General Maxwell Taylor. A live pig's head—very elaborate. Because of this the university, which is very conservative, wanted to throw all of the students out of school, expel them. Which didn't happen but there was a long trial, it's too complicated to go into now. It's very interesting.

But at any rate, after that we went to Albany. Gutman went to New York. Baritz went to Albany. I went back to graduate school officially.

Quirke: I will move to Old Westbury now, because we could talk about this all day I think. It's really interesting. You said that when you were interviewed at Old Westbury that it was a love affair, that you loved Old Westbury and that they loved you. What was Old Westbury like when you got there? What did you love about it?

Ewen: It felt like an extension of the movement. Ros drove me. I was interviewed by this guy John Ehrenreich—who you should interview for this— who had this rule. He said,

"either you like or don't like a person in thirty seconds." He thought I was great and I really liked him. He interviewed me. Then this woman Onita Hicks, who was part of the hiring committee, she interviewed me and we got along famously. By the end of the day they told me, "You have a job."

The atmosphere was really dynamic. There were people from the movement. There were students. There were faculty members. There wasn't such a discrepancy in age between the students because there were a lot of returning housewives, and lots of political activists. The professors were mainly, at that point, pretty young and very radical. There were three main departments. Politics, Economics and Society, which was the radical politics place, Culture and Communications, and I forgot the last one.

Quirke: Comparative Humanities?

Ewen: Maybe there were four. There was the music program that was called Culture and Communications, that had featured mainly jazz and had African-Americans in it. There was the American Studies program that was considered the white people's program.

Quirke: Explain that. How did it come to be that some departments were seen as white and some not white?

Ewen: Because of how people got hired and who was hiring who. PES, that became like the international program. They were like the more Leninist group.

Quirke: Okay. Anti-Colonialist?

Ewen: Anti-Colonialist, very dogmatic, very strident group of people.

Quirke: Who was in that department?

Ewen: This woman named Gloria Young Sing, who was a very powerful person at Old Westbury for a long time. This man named Peter Kwong, who eventually went to Hunter. This man named Francis Mark, who is dead. This man named Count Taylor who is an amazing anthropologist.

Quirke: Also a person of color?

Ewen: Yes. A woman named Angela Gilliam, who now lives on the West Coast. Lots of people, but they mainly were not born in the United States or came from more international backgrounds.

Quirke: So this is really interesting to me. I have never heard of the white people's department versus —was it just the white people's department and everyone else. Did they have a name for everyone else?

Ewen: There was American Studies. We were the white anarchists. The PES people thought we were anarchists and too New Left. I do think there was Comparative Humanities, Ideas and Culture who were closest to the President John Maguire, but who believed in Western culture and civilization as the ultimate expression of the human essence. We, American Studies, we were now—bottoms-up—people. So we fought with Comparative Humanities and we fought with PES constantly.

Quirke: Was this fighting productive in anyway?

Ewen: No.

Quirke: Okay.

Ewen: But you know when the left fights, it's like nothing gets resolved until the next fight.

Quirke: But I was curious because you called it dynamic and said you were attracted to it.

Ewen: It was dynamic. It was stuff I was used to. Even in my department we had fights.

Quirke: Did you have the whitest of the white?

Ewen: When I got there we didn't have many people of color. We had more women than other departments—that was just beginning to matter. It's not like we didn't want to have—it's not like we were staunchly white. We just got branded that.

Quirke: How did those fights play out in terms—if in any way that was meaningful to the students or to the curriculum perhaps? Or were they fights that tended to be more personal or personalized?

Ewen: Well, I think what happened is that a lot of students, because we had this by-law rule that said all your faculty meetings have to have 50% student representatives. In the early days, I think a lot of students benefitted. It was like continuing your education but not in the classroom. They would come to the meetings. People would try to organize them. There would be factions. It was a lesson, or lessons in organizing factions and what to do.

Did it affect the curriculum? The curriculum was extremely odd. If your major was American Studies you could take every single course you wanted in American Studies and graduate. You never had to take any other course.

Quirke: Outside of the department?

Ewen: Yeah. I mean maybe you wanted to, or maybe you did. But there were no general requirements.

Quirke: Was that true for each of the departments at Old Westbury at that point in time?

Ewen: It was true for everybody.

Quirke: It was almost as if there were divided camps?

Ewen: It was anti-requirement. A lot of the teachers who were older than I was, had come from departments where there were very rigid requirements and courses had to go through curriculum committees to get approved. There was none of that at Old Westbury. You could basically teach whatever you wanted. We taught things like how to run a mimeo machine.

Quirke: How to run what?

Ewen: A mimeo machine. It was called "Pamphleteering," but that's really what it was. We taught a course in China because people had gone to China. It was very eclectic, very interdisciplinary.

Quirke: That was the way it was when you got there in 1974?

Ewen: Oh, yeah.

Quirke: How long did it stay like that?

Ewen: It stayed like that. Well, also there were lots of strikes. There was a lot of hassling between students, and the faculty, and the administration. The administration always

wanted and there was pressure from the state to clean up, because the college was just getting out of hand. Once we moved from Planting Fields to where the campus is now, the faculty was changed and the student body was changed.

The student body originally was recruited from other campuses to put all the radicals in one place in the middle of nowhere. The faculty was sort of elitist. Then there was a revolution inside the college led by faculty and students that wanted to change. So there were two Old Westbury's. One was Planting Fields, and then Planting Fields was done away with. Then there was a planning year. Then Old Westbury came about. Old Westbury had this thing about 30:30:30:10, an integrated, diverse campus.

Quirke: That was in operation when you got there in 1974? And the student body reflected that at that point in time? You were at Old Westbury at that point in time.

Ewen: Yes. It had just been implemented. The building had just been finished. It was still a very primitive place to teach. The faculty that was recruited—I think including myself—were more politically progressive than the older faculty.

Quirke: Were there frictions between the older faculty and the newer faculty?

Ewen: Oh yeah.

Quirke: How did that play out? Did that older faculty want a more rigid curriculum?

Ewen: No, they wanted an even freer curriculum. The younger faculty felt like this curriculum makes no sense. The students could take anything. We should become more focused. The older faculty, who had been recruited from these other universities that were

very rigid in their structure were fleeing that structure and were holding on desperately to this notion of no requirements, interdisciplinary everything.

Quirke: Interdisciplinary, I'm trying to wrap my head around what that meant for them and then it sounds like it means something different for you. So interdisciplinary for them was these different departments. It was sort of generalized, different subject areas?

Ewen: Yeah, but the subject areas were very broad.

Quirke: Overlapping and free?

Ewen: Right. Interdisciplinary actually had two meanings. One was interdisciplinary in the sense of like—this is not nice—what I would call intellectual tourism. You go to Greece, you go to Rome, and you go to Medieval Europe. You study modern Europe. You have little culture courses about the culture of this country and that country. Then there was a sense of that interdisciplinary meant that you didn't just teach the canon. In other words, the accepted books of the Western tradition but you also taught insurgencies.

You taught from the bottom-up, but you kept the top so that you had this constant conflict between the top and the bottom. That was your definition of history. So that was two different focuses and that's what we fought a lot about.

Quirke: This newer crew that's coming in—the newer cadre of professors, hews more to this second line of analysis? But even having said that there are some people in certain departments—like let's say Comparative Humanities—who are just interested in the canon, as the canon?

Ewen: Yes.

Quirke: So the departments that are in conflict with that are the Music and Dance, American Studies, and PES?

Ewen: Yes.

Quirke: So how did that play out in the American Studies department? Who was in American Studies at that point in time? What were some of the conflicts you had over what the curriculum should look like, if you can remember?

Ewen: We had a senior faculty who were made up of people who were like the refugees from these traditional colleges who were in this SDS for grown-ups called the New University Conference. They were actually more traditional in their approach to curriculum. But they loved to fight with each other, and they went on and on and on fighting, and organizing students, and going through the program minutes, and looking to censor each other. Going to department meetings was like going to a brawl.

Quirke: Who were some of the people involved with the New University Conference?

Ewen: John McDermott, Florence Howe, and Paul Lauter. They had been friends but they had a factional break-up over—God knows what—that continued at Old Westbury. Then there was a junior faculty made up of me, John Ehrenreich, Ros, I think that was it, there were a couple of more people, but I can't remember.

Quirke: Were Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English there at that point or no?

Ewen: No, Barbara was gone and Deidre was also gone. But I forgot who else was there—Oh, Naomi Rosenthal was there.

Quirke: She's there pretty early on. I didn't realize that.

Ewen: She and I were hired at the same time.

Quirke: She came in '74. I didn't realize that. She comes out of a sociology background is that correct?

Ewen: Yes, but we were interdisciplinary so it didn't matter.

Quirke: So there is some conflict in the American Studies department?

Ewen: Huge conflict. The junior faculty had written this critique of the older faculty. We were about to distribute it, where I had this insight that if we distributed it, it would just continue. So we just didn't which really frustrated them. Then, we went to other senior faculty members to ask if they would be taken out of the department. Which didn't happen.

Quirke: That Florence Howe, Paul Lauter, and John McDermott, be taken out of the department? And placed in some other, magical department?

Ewen: No, placed somewhere. We just couldn't have then anymore. What happened as a result was John McDermott was given a department of one, Labor Studies. Paul and Florence—Florence disengaged. The junior faculty became the power of the department. We had led the successful revolt.

Quirke: A *coup d'etat*. When did Paul and Florence leave then? Because they both left Old Westbury at some point?

Ewen: Yeah, I think they left in the early eighties.

Quirke: Okay. So they were there?

Ewen: They were on leave. Florence was the organizer of The Feminist Press. They had sabbaticals. They stopped being as involved in the college.

Quirke: They weren't there at the start though. They didn't start in '68, either of those two.

Ewen: I don't know, but pretty early.

Quirke: So once you all win this battle for the heart of the American Studies Department—I have two questions related to that. What does that mean for what you think American Studies should be? And what you think interdisciplinarity should mean at Old Westbury? Maybe we should just go with that question for now. What does winning this battle mean for the department's curriculum and interdisciplinarity at Old Westbury?

Elizabth: Okay. It meant for example, there is this required course the American People, that used to be, when Paul was the chair, not chair—convener—of the department, that the course was about the 1930s and the 1960s, the whole course—yearlong. There were tons of people teaching this course. And there was "Intro to Women's Studies."

Quirke: I'm sorry, he does thirties through sixties, because?

Ewen: No, thirties and sixties.

Carp;: Because of the conflict in those time periods, is that why?

Elizabth: Because they were movement times. One of the things we did when we gained control of the curriculum is we made the American People a historical course, not a course where you might do an oral history—God knows what they would do. He had a lot of

people teaching it. We reduced the number. We got it down to three then finally we got it down to two. There were also these ideas of huge team-taught courses. We also did that to "Intro to Women's Studies."

We reigned in the curriculum. We organized it. It was just pure consciousness-raising before, with no substance in it. We began to add upper-division courses in periods. We also had this idea that we shouldn't have "Pamphleteering" and that kind of stuff but we should begin to have media courses. That's how we got Karl Grossman.

Quirke: He comes in '79, or '80 something like that? So really not long after you got there, maybe six years after, tops?

Ewen: Actually, John Ehrenreich rewrote the American Studies Degree. We took out a lot of the old stuff we put in this new structure of courses for American Studies. We also said, "American Studies includes Media Studies. You can't understand Media in and of itself you have to understand it within the framework of American history and society. You have to have something you can talk about rather than just technical things." We wrote this very long proposal about this. By hook or by crook, I'm not sure I understand completely why, but it passed. So there we had a whole new department.

Quirke: You said by hook or by crook it passed, why are you surprised? What's going on in the larger context of Old Westbury that there would be resistance to? I mean it had sounded like an interdisciplinary place, now you're describing a place that's…

Ewen: This was too interdisciplinary. Media for a lot of people in that period of time was kind of entertainment for the masses and wasn't worth teaching. This is—I don't think this should be in the tape—for reasons that I don't remember clearly, we wrote the proposal.

We now had a curriculum committee. We sent it to the curriculum committee. The curriculum committee sent it to the faculty council. The faculty council never voted on it. The AVP sent it to Albany and we got it approved, so it was never formally approved by the college.

Quirke: So you are describing this period in the early time when you get there '74, very dynamic, a fair a mount of friction among faculty about visions of what education should constitute the sort of body of knowledge. Then you're describing a slightly later period that actually moves towards greater structure. How did that play out, not just in the American Studies department but in the school overall? Which other people were important in moving this vision forward, of more structure it sounds like?

Ewen: There were two competing things. It was like what structure is going to move forward because it was clear things were changing. The President, John Maguire had gotten marching orders, and/or he wanted to bring in traditional disciplinary programs like Sociology, Psychology and Business. He was censured a number of times. There was a strike but it didn't work. I think in '75 or '76, maybe '75, these new programs were begun.

Quirke: The more traditional disciplinary?

Ewen: They were supposed to be a bulwark against these unruly interdisciplinary departments and students but we made inroads, they weren't all bad. The President

always wanted more and more structure. We said, "No, the only kind of structure we want is this new structure that expands the curriculum but that doesn't change the interdisciplinary focus and doesn't bring in more and more traditional departments." So we had big fights about that.

Quirke: Does he personally want this, or is he being pressured from Albany?

Ewen: Both, both, and then he went on sabbatical. The new programs came in. He went on sabbatical, then there was this acting president, the AVP, who decided we had reached 30:30:30:10 and we no longer needed it. He proposed that we just stop. And the college went nuts. We went on strike. We closed down the roads.

Quirke: Outside the campus?

Ewen: You couldn't come into the campus. There were these roving bands of students. There was also one of the first lesbian conferences that was happening during the strike and they joined forces with the organizers and the students. There was also a foxhunt because this is really wealthy country.

Quirke: This sounds like a comedy I have to tell you.

Ewen: So these people show up in their horses and their riding clothes. Nobody hunts with a real fox anymore, they spray the woods. The students and the people who were in the conference, they stopped them cold, and they had to go back. The campus was under total control of the students and the faculty who supported them.

Quirke: Do you remember when this was?

Ewen: I think it was ’76, or ’77. Then they called, they decided, “Okay, This guy is just a flunky, this AVP. We’re going to call Albany.”

Quirke: Is this Wingfield?

Ewen: No, this is right before. So they call Albany. Albany sends five provosts down. Students make them drive through the woods to allow them to get in. We have an all night negotiating session. The students won everything.

Quirke: So, you were describing the strike Liz, that took place in 1976. I did have a question about the strikes. Was that the first strike that took place?

Elizabth: No.

Quirke: So at some point I’m going to ask you, see if I can get a chronology on these events.

Elizabth: I’m not sure if I know it. I pretty much think there was a strike a year. But this one was a really big one. And it was over big-time issues like changing the composition of the college’s student body.

Quirke: Were you there when 30:30:30:10 came into existence?

Ewen: No, I got there after. The mission of Old Westbury changed once they abandoned Planting Fields. They had a year of planning.

Quirke: Yeah, so seventies are when they start up again, and they start with this 30:30:30:10.

Ewen: And they recruit different faculty.

Quirke: This is slightly different direction and I may come back to curricular questions. So when you get there in '74 there is a mix of students. Does it meet this 30:30:30:10? What did that look like to be a teacher in that diverse environment?

Ewen: It was pretty interesting because a lot of the students were older. Both black and white and Latino students were older. There were a lot of Vietnam Vets.

Quirke: They are black, Latino and white, the Vets? They are across races.

Ewen: Yes, and it was the most mixed college of SUNY which was not very mixed. It was working. I'm not sure we totally met every single quota. There was a big rap in the community, "Don't send your child to Old Westbury because it's a black, it's a minority college," which is a perception that had to be fought forever. But the people who came there, people who were—whatever the word is—white, were very interested, because they had to make a conscious decision. Did they want to go to a more traditional school or did they want to go to Old Westbury?

So a lot of them were women who were influenced by the Women's Movement and who decided to go back to school. Some of whom got beaten up by their husbands or whose husbands would sit in front of the driveway and wouldn't let them drive to school. They'd bring these stories in and tell them. So that added to the whole idea of the school as a major change institution.

Quirke: Those issues came up in the classroom? Can you think of some examples where that took place?

Ewen: Well in "Intro to Women's Studies" it certainly came up.

Quirke: You taught "Intro to Women's Studies?"

Ewen: Yeah, for a long time.

Quirke: So women would talk about their…

Ewen: Struggles with their husbands, their struggles with their children, their struggles with their—if they worked—with their colleagues, "Why are you going to college? That's not something a woman should do." There were lots of divorces as a result of this. But there were lots of women who had been traditional housewives for a while and who felt completely freed and were incredibly smart.

Quirke: I just have a sideline question on this, the women who were coming who you're saying it wasn't kosher basically for them, for the women to go to school, are they working-class women, middle-class women, is there a mix?

Ewen: There's a mix.

Quirke: Would you say there is a fair amount of working-class women?

Ewen: I think there were more middle-class women.

Quirke: I was surprised with the first Old Westbury at Planting Fields there were way more working-class people than I had ever been led to believe. I was intrigued by that, in, let's say, a Women's Studies class, does race enter into the picture while you're in this classroom? Can you describe that a little bit more?

Ewen: Yeah, well there was a lot of education about race. There were racist statements that were made. There was also very early on the issue of gay and lesbian rights. A lot of the

African-American students were really, really opposed to that concept. They said things like, "If my child ever was gay I'd kill 'em." So that was quite provocative to say the least. So yeah, there were big arguments about race.

Quirke: People are hashing out these issues in classes? You're using historical materials to tease them out more?

Ewen: Yeah, we're using, we used *Our Bodies, Ourselves.* We used books of short stories. One was predominately about a white middle and working-class women. One was about black middle and working-class students. Students wrote journals and sometimes they'd read their journals. It was also a place where people could become—have friends and seek out companionship of other women that they didn't have.

At the end of the semester we used to have a party where we brought food, booze, and marijuana. There were lots of students who had never smoked marijuana and did for the first time. It was a very giddy, incredible environment.

Quirke: Where did these parties take place?

Ewen: In C102.

Quirke: Oh, what a great room. Maybe we'll have to put a plaque on the door. Can we call it the Liz Ewen Memorial Party Room? It's nice because there's this nice little outdoor section right behind it.

Ewen: When I was first there everybody smoked. Not marijuana, but cigarettes in the classroom, which changed over time.

Quirke: I had heard such wonderful stories of Old Westbury, but when I got there people seemed to be shut off from one another. So the kind of discovery that you're describing, gender discovery, sexual identity discovery, racial discovery, it felt less there. It felt like the students were less there, perhaps the teachers were less there. Was there a change? Can you talk about the ways in which this racial balance animated the college and how that might have shifted over time?

Ewen: One of the things that happened was that when John Maguire left, we got a new president whose name was Clyde Wingfield who had been the president of Baruch College whose whole mission was to turn Old Westbury into a business college. He poured tons of resources into the business program. He created the Computer Science Department. He called social history—socialist history. He was going after everybody. Luckily—not luckily for his wife—but luckily, it turned out he was a wife beater. The Nassau County Police had to be brought in and he was arrested, and then he had to leave.

Quirke: How long was he at Old Westbury?

Ewen: Three or four years. People liked him. Some people like the Leninists in PES liked him, because they thought, " Well, he'll make the trains run on time. There's too much chaos here." During that same time myself—and believe it or not Patrick O'Sullivan of the Business Department—were working on the first development of general education.

Two different things, one was about imposing the structure and the other was trying to create a curriculum for the college that would be reflective of its' missions but also give more coherence to it. After a time he left, and another president came Eudora Pettigrew, who was there forever; the faculty, a part of the faculty hated her and went nuts about her,

and went to Albany about her constantly, and wrote these position papers. She on the other hand was a complete micro-manager and was an impossible person to work with. The life of the campus became very polarized, and not so much involvement with each other, major factions, people not speaking to each other. I was called both a Nazi and a Stalinist by a number of people. The movements began to dwindle.

Quirke: So Liz we were talking about a transition from a school that felt really fertile with the rich diverse student body that was there to a place that felt perhaps a little more shutdown, less open perhaps.

Ewen: I think that began to happen and as it began to happen faculty members retreated into their departments. There were still factions, but the factions became pro- or anti-Pettigrew, or the "don't care" faction. Meanwhile the sorts of students like the returning women they were kind of disappearing. The media program on the other hand was drawing in lots of young people, lots of minorities. The college at that point could not sustain its ideological enthusiasm for intellectual. We had one last huge fight we had was over General Education.

Quirke: Tell us a little bit about that, what that fight was over.

Ewen: Well, the General Education program that we designed…

Quirke: And there had been none prior to this point? So students came in, they did their major and that was it?

Ewen: They did math. They had to do math, other than that—nothing. I think they had to do writing. We created these things called clusters, which were combinations of traditional

courses, and then you had to take a course in the radical tradition or social theory, or social thought, or history of women and there was an international section that also emphasized that perspective. When we brought it to the faculty, especially the part called Modes of Enlightenment, people said things like, "What do you mean Enlightenment—Mozart?" They had no idea. That was the last big fight we had, but we won.

Quirke: We was you? Patrick O'Sullivan?

Ewen: It was me. No, O'Sullivan was kind of in there but no. Me, Onita Hicks, Ros, Laura I think, Hedva and other people who I don't —Charshee Maclatyre we had against these other people.

Quirke: So the General Education program is created and that's an Old Westbury thing not a SUNY thing. The mandates over SUNY don't come until the mid 90's?

Ewen: Right. So for a long time.

Quirke: For over a decade, it sounds like.

Ewen: '88, I think the program was implemented.

Quirke: So maybe just under a decade, because SUNY went crazy in the late nineties.

Ewen: Then SUNY basically destroyed it.

Quirke: This is going slightly backwards. How did you articulate, it's clear there was a high degree of consciousness about the fact that you were developing the curriculum and working with a group of students that was a non-traditional group of students. How did you guys articulate that to yourselves? Did you articulate it to others? Was the Old

Westbury experiment something that was perceived as an experiment? Was it something you talked about with other academics at other institutions? Were there things you were learning in the course of doing a pedagogy that was about peoples' lives with an unusual group of students? Where did you go with that knowledge?

Ewen: Well, we went to a lot of conferences. A lot of people came and visited Old Westbury. Old Westbury for a long time was considered a vanguard college. In that double sense of having a different student body but encapsulated in this interdisciplinary focus. A lot of places that people would go and talk. People wanted to emulate Old Westbury.

Quirke: So we were discussing your and other faculty's awareness or consciousness of Old Westbury as an unusual experiment.

Ewen: Oh yeah, we knew it was unusual. We wanted it to become a model for other colleges. That was harder than we understood. There were a few places like Old Westbury. There was Evergreen College in Washington. There was Ramapo in New Jersey. There was William Patterson, which is a little bit like us, in New Jersey.

Quirke: Livingston College at Rutgers as well.

Ewen: There are places, but not that many. I think the cutting edge issue was the racial issue. Because if Old Westbury, to this day, has more minorities, percentages of minorities than all the other SUNYs combined, that doesn't speak well for the other SUNYs. I think there was a real attempt on the part of anti-Old Westbury politicians to fuel.

And where Old Westbury is—it's in the middle of the richest part of the country, the North Shore of Long Island. It's like a crazy place to put a college. We have had the

Chairman of the Board of Trustees who wanted to sell most of the land and make it into a development. We fought back. It's been hard maintaining it.

Quirke: Do you perceive that it was a success? Stepping away, you've retired now, do you feel like that experiment was a success? A better question would be; in what ways do you think it succeeded? And in what ways did you fail from what you had hoped to achieve?

Ewen: I think it succeeded in the sense that a lot of students from a bunch of different backgrounds, a lot of them first time to college students, got an education, got their lives changed, had their parents come and see them graduate, got jobs, and mainly got educated, and got excited about what they were learning. I think that probably still goes on. I think that the energy of Old Westbury students is phenomenal.

You have to wake people up a little bit. Sometimes teaching, as my friend, colleague Ros Baxendall says, "It's like class struggle." But I felt like there were always students to reach; students who during the first couple of weeks, you would have no idea.

Where I think we went wrong is, that I think we were creating programs like General Education, which was, more in the mind than suited to the personnel of the college. So there were people who found it too difficult to implement and people who didn't know how to teach it. I think that was a lot of the problem of Old Westbury. We began to get more and more of a traditional faculty base, as ideas of being a radical intellectual kind of faded, and more identity politics took over, that became a problem.

Quirke: Would you say that happened as early as the eighties? Or did that happen later, more in the nineties or the twenty-first century?

Ewen: I say by the late eighties you could begin to feel the crumbling. The fight against the President Pettigrew was insane.

Quirke: And that lasted nearly a decade?

Ewen: Yeah, and it was completely a divisive thing.

Quirke: What were the issues? You said she micromanaged, but what beyond that?

Ewen: What happened first, which nobody liked—people didn't like her period. She was very autocratic. One of the first things she did was to retrench the Music program, which pissed off a lot of people. There were sit-ins about it, and she prevailed and they were retrenched. That didn't auger well.

She was very authoritarian, and she was constantly meddling about everything. She'd hear something that somebody said about her, she'd go to the chair and say, "What did this person say about me and why?" She wouldn't leave things alone. They thought that she was autocratic, that she had no faculty base, which was pretty much true. That she was a terrible president, which was true. And she was a very unlikable person. So when she would go to Albany in her own defense, she would alienate everybody.

Quirke: Did that have an effect do you think on the moneys coming into SUNY Old Westbury, or no?

Ewen: I think the moneys coming into SUNY Old Westbury didn't matter, except for when Calvin Butts was hired. One of the things that happened to SUNY Old Westbury and that always happened was that we were always starving for resources. And that was deliberate, and that was because of the racial nature of the college.

Quirke: I want to backtrack slightly, you talked about the strikes and you talked about the big strike in ’76 I believe. The big one over the attempt to get rid of 30:30:30:10. What were some of the other issues that motivated the strikes?

Ewen: The other issues were fees going up, dormitory fees being too high, the disregard on the part of the administration for certain student needs. Student Activities was always starved for money. People went out on strike about that. There was a lot of just not caring, and kind of discrimination for no reason, against a tremendous number of students on the part of the staff. There were lots of, not major strikes, but strikes.

Quirke: Did any of those have wins?

Ewen: Yeah, Well I think that one of them I think ’75, ’76, I don’t remember, made the staff more human towards the students. Not for a long time but for a little while. I think the major big time strike was the 30:30:30:10.

Quirke: I’ve heard stories of both feminism on Long Island being birthed out of Old Westbury and the Young Lords being birthed out of Old Westbury. What do you know about this? Any of these?

Ewen: I know the Young Lords was organized at Old Westbury. That’s why I said to call Paul Lauter. I don’t remember the names of the people. But I do know the organization was founded. The first Women’s Studies course in the country was taught at Old Westbury.

Quirke: Who taught it?

Ewen: Oh, huge numbers of people. Florence, Ros, this woman Anne Barstow from Comparative Humanities, the President’s wife, Billy Maguire. There were like eight

teachers. They came up with a curriculum. Florence was beginning the Feminist Press, she published the curriculum and it was copied by a lot of different colleges. It's true that, I don't think feminism, but one of the wings of feminism that is "Intro to Women's Studies" came out of Old Westbury.

Quirke: So that's like '71, '72 that this course was being developed. You come in '74 and also participated in it.

Ewen: But it was getting unweilding.

Quirke: The thing I said about feminism actually came from articles in the paper where Long Island people were describing it.

Ewen: I think that, the "Intro to Women's Studies" happened, I don't think at Planting Fields, I think at the beginning of Old Westbury II.

Quirke: Can you talk a little bit more about the role of women at Old Westbury? Certainly myself, looking at graduate school even in the nineties, it was still at least in the profession of history, very male-dominated. What was it like at Old Westbury in terms of women on the faculty, women in the administration, etc.?

Ewen: It was better than the norm. We had a conscious policy of hiring women faculty. In fact at a certain point in American Studies we felt we had to start to hire some men because we were looking too unbalanced. That wasn't true in every department, but I think that Old Westbury, as a college was more open to hiring women than a lot of other colleges were.

The staff always, not always, but we consistently had women as Academic Vice Presidents, and other key positions. I don't think there was that much of a problem about women because of the nature of the founding of the college that there were in other colleges.

Quirke: What about racial diversity in the faculty?

Ewen: I told you that American Studies was always criticized for being a white program. We did hire some African-Americans, Elaine Scott being the first one. There were tensions. There were some departments that were predominately African-American like the music program. There were others that had very few. There was always an active African-American voice pushing for more hires, pushing for more emphasis. I think we had more emphasis on the curriculum, than we did actual faculty members who were black.

Quirke: I think Old Westbury historically, actually historically has higher rates of black faculty, it's a little less now than it was fifteen years ago, and that's unusual. I was curious if there was a consciousness about that.

Ewen: There was a consciousness about recruiting, hiring, especially in the sciences. I remember these two people in the sciences. This man named Samuel Von Winbush and this other guy named George Stefano said, "People tell us that it's really hard to hire African-American scientists, and that's just nonsense. Because we look very carefully." That was true. We had more Black scientists I think than other colleges had. But there was always a push to have more and more, which was right.

Quirke: I think we're getting close to the limit that we talked about. I wonder if there are any other memories of Old Westbury that you want to share. Any other ideas about Old Westbury?

Ewen: I just think that Old Westbury was for me an extension of the movement that I had been a part of before, both intellectually and in terms of activism. The first, let's say ten or fifteen years that I was there, even though there was a lot of factions and hatreds, it was a pretty dynamic place to be.

I think it was always underfunded, never seen as a mainstream college, never got a good academic reputation, so people would say, "Why do you want to teach there?" I think that hurt the college. I think on the whole it was a pretty amazing experience and it was also exhausting. After thirty-five years, I really miss the students.

Quirke: Anything else you want to add?

Ewen: I just want to say in addition to the parties to "Intro to Women's Studies," also at the end of every semester, at night, the PES department would throw a party for the whole school. Those were enormous, gigantic mix of things. I went to one, this is really ridiculous, but I went to one early on in my career at Old Westbury and these three African-American male students came up to me and said, "Are you June Allyson? You look just like her." And I thought, "Wow!" So anyway it wasn't a party school, but at the end of the semester people really, faculty and students, and administrators, would come and they would dance and they would drink.

There was also May Day, which happened every May Day, in the, what's it called? Think of the old Academic Village. The rooftop! The whole rooftop would be covered with food. People would bring all kinds of food from all different kinds of countries. There were two people there; one was named Count Taylor who was a very elegant African-American anthropologist who was extremely handsome. And he and this woman, who was the Academic Vice President, her name was Emilia Doyaga. who claimed when she was hired to be Puerto Rican but she really was Spanish. She would get dressed in this very elaborate party dress, and they would do a tango in front of the entire campus and it was very sexy. That was like the highlight of this event. So there were a lot of things going on.

Quirke: So people brought food, the school didn't pay for it, the people made it happen.

Ewen: Yeah.

Quirke: Sounds pretty wonderful, I think we need one of those May Days.

Ewen: It was just to raise money for the day care center so it was something that was integral to the mission, but it was also a day when people just had a lot of fun.

Quirke: Any other stories?

Ewen: Not that I know now. I'm sure that there are a billion of them. That's the thing about Old Westbury. That's why it's good to do an oral history. There are lots of different stories and there are lots of different perspectives.

Quirke: Thank you this was a really wonderful interview. It's been a pleasure to discuss this with you.