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CHRIS DAVIS: Welcome to the *Career and Academic Resource Center* podcast. I'm Chris Davis, the Associate Director of the Career and Academic Resource Center. And it is my great pleasure to have you here with me today, Maggie Doherty who we're going to talk a little bit about her background. But she teaches at Harvard. She teaches at Extension School. She has written a book called *The Equivalents* that was published just a few months ago. And we're going to talk a little bit about the subject of her book, her background, and also why I think her book subject is of interest to our students who are, in many cases, nontraditional and adult learners. So first of all welcome, Maggie. Thank you for being here today.

MAGGIE Thank you, Chris, so much for having me.

DOHERTY:

CHRIS DAVIS: And I looked at the courses that you're teaching today. In this semester, you're teaching The Art of the Book Review. And very intriguingly, where I saw in the spring you're teaching Advanced Nonfiction Writing Biography.

MAGGIE Yes. I'm looking forward to that one. I'm really enjoying teaching The Book Review course right now.

DOHERTY:

CHRIS DAVIS: And yeah. So I wanted to get into it. So you earlier this year published, the book's title is *The Equivalents*. A story of art, female friendship, and liberation in the 1960s. It's about the inaugural first few years of the Radcliffe Institute. I thought it would be helpful. I'm assuming some or many of our students have heard of the Radcliffe Institute or have heard the name Radcliffe. But can you talk a little bit about what the Radcliffe Institute was, why was it important when it was formed before we start to get into the subject.

MAGGIE Sure. So the Radcliffe Institute has gone by a few different names over the course of its existence. It was founded in November of 1960, although the first class came the following fall in September 1961 as the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study. And this was when its founder, Mary Ingraham Bunting, who had just been announced as Radcliffe college president saw as a messy experiment in women's higher education.

The purpose of the institute as she saw it, was to help women realize what they could achieve. She was very concerned with how women in the 1950s were taught to set their expectations really low. Women were going to college in record numbers, but they were often dropping out or getting married while still in college. And they didn't really have a sense that their educations were for anything. There was actually talk at the time of changing curriculum for female students. So that it was all about marital counseling, homemaking, time management. Because the idea was why learn about the metaphysical poets, why learn mathematics if what you're ultimately going to do is stay home and raise children.

So Bunting, who is a microbiologist and also raised four children, wanted to combat this cultural idea. And she designed this program, this fellowship program, that would grant talented women, women who had either a PhD in an academic field or the equivalent of a PhD in artistic achievement an opportunity to come to Harvard for two years. To have access to Harvard University resources, to have an office space, and to have a stipend.

The stipend basically amounted to earnings for a part time job, which it would be about \$28,000, \$29,00 today. So this was a really big deal in the 1960s. Both because it was breaking with a *Feminine Mystique* in the feminist study of Friedan's words about what women's purpose was in life, and because it was also suggesting something about the possibilities for higher education.

This was a time of great expansion in higher education in America. And Bunting's program was part of that even though it was only for about 24 women in the first class. The Bunting Institute lasted for a long time. I just called it the Bunting, which is the second name. So after a certain point, it was named the Bunting Institute in honor of its founder, and it existed in this form right up through 1999. This form being a women specific institute.

Fellowships were awarded every year to a mix of scientists, scholars, artists, humanists, social scientists. And they would all gather at Radcliffe to share their office space and to share their work in seminars. This changed in 1999 when Radcliffe, which was the women's college, officially merged with Harvard. Women and men had been taking classes at Harvard for a long time by that point, but they were still separate institutions.

When they formally merged in 1999, federal law basically prohibits having a single sex institution of the kind that the Institute was. So they restructured the Institute. And now what exists is this program called the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, which still awards fellowships to social scientists, and scientists, and artists, and humanists, but to people of all identities. So the program is still going strong and the Radcliffe Institute, as a research institute, it's still a really wonderful resource for scholars, and readers, and anyone interested in women's history, especially. But some changes have happened with the times.

CHRIS DAVIS: I think I recall you mentioning that one of the alumni of the first two years who I believe you had spoken to in research for your book had some mixed feelings about that. But you said circumstances have changed.

MAGGIE DOHERTY: Yes. It was disappointing I think. For a lot of people the Bunting Institute meant a lot to people. And I think there was some disappointment at its closure in the form of this women's community.

CHRIS DAVIS: And I think you quote Bunting as wanting to reach out to intellectually displaced women. I think that's how it was phrased. And so, the women that you write about in this book, I'm assuming that many of our students maybe have heard of one or two of them but perhaps most these names will be unfamiliar.

And one of the pleasures of reading your book was getting to see their stories a little bit. It spoke to me also because one of my high school English teachers who to this day is I think one of the best instructors I've ever had, had extreme high regard for Tillie Olsen. And we had read *Tell Me a Riddle* in high school and it's stuck with me for many years. But the writer, Tillie Olsen, was one of these women, the poets Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin. The sculptors, Marianna Pineda, and the painter visual artist, Barbara Swan.

MAGGIE DOHERTY: I'll start with Olson because she was actually my way into this project. So I started thinking about Tillie Olsen when I was a graduate student writing my dissertation, and I read a chapter on Olson. And I learned that even though she spent most of her life on the West Coast, she lived in San Francisco and was a very politically active in the Bay Area. She'd spent two years at Radcliffe. And I was very curious to know what she was up to, how she got here.

And in following her biography, that led me to these early years of the Radcliffe Institute. Olsen was in some ways the most unusual presence at the institute during those years. She was much older than the other women at the Institute, and especially this circle of artists, the equivalence that the book is centered around. She was 50 by the time she got there. And this was her last gasp as a writer.

She had started writing as a young woman out in California, where she was doing a lot of political organizing. So she was writing these newspaper articles, reporting on strikes, reporting on police brutality. And she was very creative. She was a little bit of a modernist, she wanted to experiment with prose even as she was talking about very present realities. She was really enchanting and exciting to a lot of people at the time.

She ended up pushing writing aside because she had four daughters, who she had to take care of. And she also had to work. So one of the ways that she was really unusual for the institute is most women there were middle class, upper middle class. Many of them were married to Harvard faculty members. And Olsen was this working class woman who when asked to provide her credentials, talked about how working full time actually gave her all these powers of observation and insight that a PhD wouldn't have been able to give her.

And she was often really critical of elite institutions and elite spaces even as she ended up benefiting from them. Later in her career, she taught at MIT and Amherst. And so, she bit a little bit uneasily within the institute. She got there through Anne Sexton. So she and Anne Sexton have struck up a correspondence, they were mutual admirers of each other's work. And Anne Sexton in a lot of ways was the opposite of Olsen.

She was living in Newton, she was from a very wealthy WASP family that had been in New England for a long time. And she had met with immediate success as soon as she started writing poetry. She started in her late 20s after struggling with depression, after having her two daughters. She picked it up from a PBS show about how to write a sonnet, or what is a sonnet. And she just started writing. And within a few years, had published her first book to great acclaim.

So she and Olsen had really different economic circumstances, really different career paths, but understood each other in this intuitive way that really involved their passion for art. Sexton's best friend was Maxine Kumin. Also a poet, also living in Newton. Also tall, attractive, dark-haired. They sometimes look like twins. People at the institute called them the poets, as if they were a pair. But Kumin was actually pretty different from Sexton. Her poetry was really different. It was less personal, less emotional, more in touch with the natural world, more about observing your environment, really. Sensitive, more formal.

She's been compared to Robert Frost by some critics. And she was more reserved and more, someone who was often responsible for a lot of other people, including Sexton. Sexton and Kumin remained best friends throughout Sexton's life. And one of the things I talk about in the book is how they collaborated. They were really great collaborators without ever taking over or adulterating each other's work.

The two visual artists, Barbara Swan and Marianna Pineda. Pineda joined in the second year, Swan was part of the first class. And they remind me of the writers in some ways. Because like the three writers, they were also really interested in making art out of women's experience. So Swan was a portraitist. She was really interested in trying to capture the soul or the personality of whichever person she was drawing or painting.

And when her children were quite young, she had two children, she did a lot of art about them. She would sketch them, she would paint them. And her paintings, especially her paintings of motherhood are very dark and uncanny, and off-putting in certain moments. And in that way she reminds me of some of the more honest representations of motherhood that we see in Olsen and Sexton's work, especially.

Pineda also is really fascinated with motherhood as a subject for art. Her teachers, all of whom were men have said that as soon as she had kids, she was going to stop sculpting. She wouldn't have any time or interest. And she did for a couple of years. But then she had a breakthrough, where she made a sculpture of a pregnant woman. All of her sculpture was life sized, but a smallish figure with a very round belly. And she called it *The Sleepwalker*.

And this was her big breakthrough after having children. So she had a bunch of sculptures of women, of pregnant women. She did a sculpture of a woman in labor, which was a taboo breaking thing for fine art in the 1950s. And when she was at the institute, she did this series of sculptures of prophetesses, of oracles. And one of them is still in Radcliffe Yard today. So anyone who's interested in local, can go check out Marianna Pineda's work right next to Schlesinger Library.

CHRIS DAVIS: One thing I wanted to share more from you on one of the fascinating things about the book is how, I don't know if you use these words exactly. But you place these women in their work. And I think at one point, you said something along the lines of they were in a way born too early to really I think enjoy the fruits of the feminist movement.

And in the book I think your situating or framing this as-- generally speaking, the feminist movement is thought to have begun in earnest in the late 1960s, and the 1970s. And you talk about how these women and their peers, their colleagues were actually part of it. And talking about the importance of acknowledging that. And as you mentioned the *Feminine Mystique* earlier, one of the interesting things I didn't know was that Bunting was a collaborator with Betty Friedan, but they parted ways. But can you talk a little bit about how you wanted to position these women in their work and also talking about how they fit into or don't fit into what is perceived as the beginning of the feminist movement?

MAGGIE DOHERTY: I think what drew me to this period specifically is this moment of transition between two really different times in American history. So you have the 1950s, which is this decade of intense conformity and intense privacy, there's surveillance, we have McCarthy making sure there are no communists, you have neighbors really curious about Bunting's husband let her drive a car. And this was a really big deal for all her neighbors who are watching her drive her car. And it was like, Oh something's going on in the Bunting household. This woman has so much freedom. Is that OK?

And then you have the 1960s, where we see a bunch of the social and political movements that were happening in the 1950s. I think one thing that's important always when talking about history and periods of history is that there's often a lot of stuff happening under the surface or out of the public eye. Civil rights organizing is happening through the 40s and the 50s, there have been feminists and socialists feminists in particular throughout American history who are organizing unions and who are doing a lot of this political work way before we get the *Feminine Mystique* in 1963 and all of this chatter about women's liberation in the late 1960s.

But at the same time, the 1960s look really different from the 1950s. Everything changed in terms of family making, dating, romance, job prospects, various laws and policies that govern freedom and rights for all marginalized people. All of this stuff starts to draw attention and starts to change. So one thing that drew me to this particular group of women and this period is thinking about what it meant to navigate that transition. Especially as someone who is not a young person when the transition happens. But these women were in their late 30s, and Olsen was 50.

Which is, they have established lives. They have children, and marriages, and homes. And while some women their age did walk away from all that. Vivian Gornick, Adrienne Rich. These women didn't. And so how to live with these daunting political realizations while being attached to older forms of living and/or relating to people. So I think Olsen is a little bit of an exception as always because she was such a politically conscious and politically committed person.

The other women in this group all had really different relationships to feminism and to women's liberation. Some renounced it, some were happy enough to call themselves feminist. Some felt like they had already figured it out for themselves long before women's liberation was even a slogan. But I think that all of their work, all of this art they made that took women's experience represented it, communicated it in these taboo breaking honest complicated ways, contributed to all of the political goals of women's liberation. A lot of the women who were active in that movement were really inspired by Sexton's poetry, by Olsen's writing.

So I guess that's one of to me always the interesting things about writing is that art of all kinds is that it has a life of its own. That you make it and you have an idea of what you want from it or want it to mean. But then it goes out into the world and it means different things to different people. So in this book, you see a little bit of that. You see what they were thinking about when they made their art, and then what their art meant in the world.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you for that. That's fascinating. So I wanted to ask a two pronged question. I guess tying it into something I referenced earlier. So and you talk about in the book how throughout, I mean, your book covers goes through the 1960s and until the year of, I think in Sexton's death in 1974. And you talk about how the social movements that came to Harvard eventually inspired or forced the Institute also to become a more diverse institution. And you talk about Alice Walker. And I had no idea that she had been part of this, attended the Radcliffe Institute. That was really fascinating.

A lot of our students are coming back to higher education for various reasons later in their lives. Do you think that a community of female scholars like this has the same urgency to exist as it did at that time? And do you think in a way that programs like our schools, like the Extension School that offer continuing education opportunities? I think in more robust ways than probably existed in those days feels that niche. Because as I said, there are a lot of students that I work with that I could see if they had been around back during that time, something like this would have been perfect for them.

**MAGGIE
DOHERTY:**

Yes. That's a really, really interesting question. I guess just to start with continuing education programs. So this was something that Bunting was thinking a lot about when she designed the Radcliffe Institute. continuing 'ed was a thing in the 1950s, especially for women. So she had actually designed a continuing education program when she was the Dean of the Women's College at Rutgers. And she was really hoping to inspire a bunch of programs like this. She had this sense that women's lives were not linear, they weren't straightforward. And that often, the years that a woman wanted to be having children and staying close to small children were some of these crucial years for education and career.

And she thought, well, why make them choose? Why not give them a chance to have kids in their 20s and 30s and then go back to school, finish their degree, advance their degree in their late 30s and 40s when their children are basically out of the house. This still makes a lot of sense. I think in some ways today, this is not typically the path that's advised anymore in the way that it was actually advised in the 1950s for women. But I think Bunting's identification of that conflict that the years when you're best equipped to parent or also the years you're supposed to be getting an education and advancing a career, that is a really intense conflict that we don't really have an answer to.

So I think continuing education programs play a super important role for people in that particular situation. But also for any number of people such as Tillie Olsen, who didn't have the financial means to go to college when she was 18. Her family were Russian immigrants. They were farmers in Nebraska. She wasn't going to have the chance to go to college right off the bat. And so for her, having the chance to go back to academia after she'd raised a family and she'd worked, was really wonderful. She wouldn't leave the library. Once she got there, she just wanted to stay in the library all day.

But at the same time, I was so conscious researching this book about the limits of what any individual institution can do. So the Radcliffe Institute was wonderful for the women who attended it. But still only so many could attend it in each year. And they also had to demonstrate all of this success or potential for success. And even though, as you said, the standards did become less exclusive. At first you had to be local, they did away with that as a standard for acceptance later on. They were much more conscious of financial need and racial diversity. But still you're only going to have 20 plus women a year taking advantage of this.

So even as you have all of these programs trying to address the things that get in the way of individuals and educational opportunity, you're still relying on working within a smaller pool. And so one thing when I think about, well, do we need another Radcliffe Institute? Or if not Radcliffe with Institute, what kind of Institute do we need? I often just start thinking about what else could we do socially at a national level to make education more accessible.

Tons of students go to college. And the majority of them are in debt, or they're going to school while working full time, or they're having to take a long time to complete their degrees. And part of this does have to do with a number of social factors. Whether that's the lack of affordable child care in this country, that means that people are always juggling, parenting, and work, and whatever education they're interested in at the time. Or the rising cost of college, or just the high cost of so many things that people need to live. Whether it's health insurance, or housing, or anything else.

And so part of me wonders, looking back at this period in the 1960s where we see things like the institute, but we also see things like the 1965 higher Education Act, which develops a bunch of grants for people to go to college. We have the GI Bill, coming right after World War II, that sends so many veterans to school for so little money. And I think, well, maybe there's also some work to be done on that end, making education just much more affordable and accessible across the board to anyone who wants it.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah. You touch on something very, very important. And I'm so glad you did. And I think on that thought provoking note, we can say thank you. Thank you so much Maggie for joining me today.

MAGGIE Thank you so much for having me. This is really nice.

DOHERTY:

CHRIS DAVIS: And I really encourage everyone to read the book. Even if you're not familiar with these women or their work, I think it paints such a fascinating and relevant as we've discussed. Portrait of a recent time in our history. That one that's in very close proximity to our institution. And it's a cultural biography that's also just a very gripping read. So I enjoyed it very much.

MAGGIE Great. Thank you so much.

DOHERTY:

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CHRIS DAVIS: You have listened to the CARC podcast. And this is the podcast with a Career in Academic Research Center here at Harvard, Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.

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