

ASECS WOMEN'S CAUCUS 50th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Interview with Dr. Susan S. Lanser, Professor Emerita, Brandeis University

By Kaushik Tekur

- How did you become interested in eighteenth-century studies?

My career path was decidedly atypical: I studied Comparative Literature in the heyday of Theory, when most of us specialized not in periods but in genres and approaches. I focused on narrative and gender, and my work always encompassed eighteenth-century texts. A course on eighteenth-century French women writers was especially consequential: the professor gave us a list of names, declared she knew nothing about them, and let us loose to do our own research. But I did not know the conventional canon and would have failed an English field exam, though I might have pulled one off in French.

But serendipitously, in 1984 when I was teaching at Georgetown, I took a Folger faculty seminar on Diderot offered by Rutgers Professor Jack Undank. I soon announced to my department that I was going to be a dix-huitièmiste and was promptly reminded that those courses were already covered. That didn't matter; I was hooked. Jack also introduced me to ASECS, which we attended together that year and where I experienced my first Women's Caucus lunch.

- Could you tell us a bit about your early involvement with ASECS and how you first became involved with the Women's Caucus, and what drew you to it?

Despite that early introduction to ASECS and the Women's Caucus, I didn't get seriously involved in the Society until the 1990s. I served on the Executive Board at that time, but the Women's Caucus was my academic home: a space of intellectual excitement and personal support that gave me the courage, especially as someone who had come to the field late and *through* the study of women -- to immerse myself in eighteenth-century projects. My attraction to the Women's Caucus was predictable; what was not predictable was the warmth of my welcome and the intellectual ferment and political solidarity that characterized the Caucus in those days. In the Women's Caucus and in the then newly formed Lesbian and Gay Caucus, I found an intellectual, professional, and collegial community of brilliant and committed scholars, many of whom also became lifelong friends.

- How has the Women's Caucus impacted your scholarship, teaching, and/or any other aspects of your career?

It's difficult for me to imagine what my career would have looked like *without* the Women's Caucus. It was a place of both intellectual ferment and social solidarity at a time when the Society itself was perhaps quantitatively egalitarian but certainly not qualitatively so. Especially in the 1990s and 2000s, ASECS was my *salon*: a place for conversations that inspired new thinking, new projects, and new collaborations. An idea that percolated over lunch could yield not only next year's panel but a new article or a co-edited book. But the Caucus was also more homogeneous in those earlier days than I then recognized: mostly white, mostly American, mostly scholars of English or French, mostly appointed to the tenure-track positions that have now become scarce. And so there were perhaps also ways in which some of us were not being challenged.

- What are some projects or ideas you currently find yourself spending a lot of your time on?

I'm finishing up for publication a piece on eighteenth-century readers' resistance to the fictionality of fictional works, a paper that also questions the assumption that a clean divide between fiction and nonfiction was sealed by the late eighteenth century—or ever. At the same time, eighteenth-century studies have been only a part, if a major part, of my scholarship. I'm drawn right now to studying narratives by and about Palestinians as a project that complements my activist work. But I am also dipping into eighteenth-century Jewish studies, a field underrepresented in ASECS and certainly in the Women's Caucus, and one that stretches the conventional geographic horizons of eighteenth-century studies to embrace not only Western Europe and North America but Eastern Europe, North Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. I'm blending my narratological, feminist, and eighteenth-century interests by way of a paper for the 2026 ASECS on Olga Tokarczuk's eighteenth-century-centered masterpiece *The Books of Jacob*. I'm not yet sure what else will emerge from this new interest.

- In your piece, “Aging with Austen”, you write about how your ways of reading Austen have changed over time from when you were a grad student to the time you became a professor emerita. Along similar lines, could you tell us how your approach to the Women’s Caucus has changed over time?

The Caucus is still a cornerstone of ASECS for me: excepting one year when I was giving a talk in faraway Montenegro, I haven’t missed a single ASECS Annual Meeting--or a Women’s Caucus Lunch--for over three decades. But I’ve certainly felt the importance of ceding leadership to younger scholars, not only formally within the Caucus itself but intellectually in terms of vision and priorities. As an emerita professor, I’m also, of course, less dependent on professional institutions and professional connections than I used to be. So I see this as a time to give back, so that younger scholars can fruitfully pursue intersectional work focused on women and gender and continue to find in the Caucus a place of intellectual inspiration and professional support.

- And as an extension of that, could you tell us a bit about how the Women’s Caucus’s relation to ASECS has changed over time?

Not only has the relationship between the Women’s Caucus and ASECS changed dramatically during the past ten or fifteen years, but the Women’s Caucus has been a galvanizing force that has helped to change ASECS itself. There was a time when ASECS *was* a proverbial boys’ club, one that encouraged “trial by fire” responses by powerful (mostly male) members to Annual Meeting presentations by younger (often female) scholars in ways that we might now recognize as harassment. There was a time when women had little place in ASECS leadership politically, even when they seemed to hold that place numerically; I remember some frustrating and embattled conversations with senior male leaders when I served on the ASECS Board in the

1990s. I see a significant change in the Society's values in the 2010s, and I attribute the impetus for that change both to the activism of the Women's Caucus and to the leadership of the late Srinivas Aravamudan, who served as the Society's president in 2015-2016 in a term cut short by his tragically early death. Srinivas modeled for ASECS the kind of open, participatory culture that already characterized the Women's Caucus, and many of the officers who followed him have brought to the Society's leadership the inclusive spirit already embodied in the Women's Caucus. Indeed, I'd say that the Women's Caucus has been something of a proving ground for many an ASECS leader.

- Within feminist scholarship, specifically, you have drawn our attention to how race, empire, colonialism, sexuality, and other such intersectional ways of reading literature have gained more prominence in the last few years. How would you say the Women's Caucus has engaged that shift in terms of its relation with other ASECS caucuses, such as the Queer and Trans Caucus, the Race and Empire Caucus, and the Disability Studies Caucus?

As I mentioned above, in its early days the Caucus was more homogeneous than I recognized at the time: mostly white, mostly American, mostly scholars of English or French, mostly appointed to the tenure-track positions that have now become scarce. And so there were also ways in which some of us—and the field in general--were not being challenged. But individual Women's Caucus members, and more recently the Caucus itself, have played important roles of leadership in moving the Society toward deeper engagements with questions of race and racism not only within the eighteenth century but within our scholarly, pedagogical, and professional practices. This is work too important, of course, to be left to any single caucus; it is the work of the entire Society. It's my sense that as eighteenth-century studies becomes increasingly intersectional and increasingly global, we are seeing more and more scholarship that commingles the concerns we might associate with various individual caucuses. For example, while one thread of

inquiry might unite ASECS papers sponsored by a particular caucus, many of those papers could also have been offered under the aegis of another caucus or without any caucus sponsorship. Each caucus continues to have its central concerns, and that helps to guarantee that those concerns matter to the Society as a whole. But I think we're also building a much more holistic practice of eighteenth-century studies than the field has yet seen. Rather than fragmenting ASECS, the caucuses have helped to cement our intellectual commitments.

- What are some generative issues or concerns that the Women's Caucus has to tussle with in the days to come?

Two concerns come to mind. First, at a time of shrinking academic appointments in the humanities as a whole and eighteenth-century studies in particular, the Caucus can offer rising scholars the kind of intellectual community that was easier for many of us to experience when we had eighteenth-centuryist colleagues in our own or nearby institutions. In 1989, I moved from Georgetown University, where my department had only one other eighteenth-centuryist and no PhD program, to the University of Maryland, where I found myself among a lively cohort of colleagues and students engaged in our field. Joining that vibrant community made me smarter. Especially in the age of Zoom, the Women's Caucus--and ASECS itself--can form intentional communities for our members, so that we can become smarter together

And as I've recently noted in the pages of *ECS*, the Women's Caucus remains the only one formed around an identity rather than a scholarly approach. While that identitarian project may have been crucial in the early years, it implicitly conflates feminist scholarship with female embodiment. And this, in turn, may have become a deterrent to participation by men and possibly also to nonbinary members. To be sure, there was a time when ASECS was run almost exclusively by men, and some of those men underestimated the intellectual and professional contributions—the sheer brilliance—of women in the field. That made the *Women's* Caucus a logical

conceptual choice. Those days seem to be behind us, so it's perhaps also time, whether through a new name or through different messaging, for a more expansive Caucus identity. To be sure, women still face double standards and gendered challenges in the academic workplace, and the Caucus has been brilliant in dedicating one of its two yearly ASECS panels to (gendered) professional concerns. But many of those concerns also pertain to BIPOC and queer scholars, so perhaps ASECS itself needs to devote more meeting space to exploring professional issues in ways that the Women's Caucus has pioneered.

What advice do you have for members of the Caucus, both experienced and early-career scholars?

I'd encourage all Caucus members to help bring in new scholars of all identities. And I'd encourage early-career scholars to make use of senior scholars for mentoring and support. Sometimes, early- and late-career scholars do forge happy connections over a Women's Caucus lunch, but it might be worth creating more formal and ongoing mentoring connections and conversations. Not only individual members of both generations, but the field as a whole, will benefit from this greater cross-fertilization