Overview of the Collection

Creator  Gurko, Jane
Title  Sally Miller Gearhart papers
Dates  1956-2015 (inclusive)
       1956  2015
Quantity  6.5 linear feet, (17 containers)
          41.8 unprocessed linear feet, (26 rsb; 1 msb; 1 oversize flat box; 3 folders (digital))
Collection Number  Coll 305
Summary  Sally Miller Gearhart (April 15, 1931- ) is a scholar of speech, communication, and drama; a civil rights activist; and a writer of novels, short stories, and essays that deal with lesbianism, feminist rhetoric, homosexuality and religion, and gay rights. The collection includes correspondence, academic works, literary works, reviews of literary work, biographical information, photographs, audio/visual material, work by Jane Gurko, and artifacts.
Repository  University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives.
          UO Libraries--SCUA
          1299 University of Oregon
          Eugene OR
          97403-1299
          Telephone: 541-346-3068
          spcarref@uoregon.edu
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Languages  English
Sponsor  Funding for encoding this finding aid was provided through a grant awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Historical Note

Sally Miller Gearhart is often described as a lesbian, a science fiction writer, and a political activist. While Gearhart might be all of these things, she is a woman who ultimately transcends the labels assigned to her. Her work, personal journeys, writings, and even her public persona reveal a woman with numerous interests and concerns.

Gearhart is best known for her work in the radical lesbian feminist movement, but her life was not always so radical. Her involvement in progressive political causes was the result of a long personal journey. In fact, Gearhart's childhood and entrance into young adulthood were fairly sheltered. She was born on April 15, 1931 to Sarah Miller Gearhart and Kyle Montague Gearhart. She spent her childhood in Virginia's Appalachian mountains, where the community was conservative and heavily invested in the tenets of the Protestant Christian faith. After her parents divorced, Gearhart was raised primarily by
her mother and grandmother; because of their investment in her life, Gearhart says that she learned that women "are the source of power, the heart of action, and the focal point of love." Surrounded by the warmth of these women, she spent a happy childhood as a carefree tomboy, haunting the local theater. Because her grandmother owned the theater building, Gearhart was able to view movies for free. "I saw every single one," she declared, and the impact of theater would have a profound influence on her life.

As she was growing into a young woman, Gearhart complied with the social climate surrounding her. However, she knew that she desired something different. "There was another undercurrent going on. That was my lesbianism. From when I was ten years old, I knew that I wasn't going to have children," she said. Instead of continuing on a path towards marriage, Gearhart matriculated at Sweet Briar College, an all women’s college near Lynchburg, Virginia. "They tried very hard to make a lady out of me and failed miserably," Gearhart commented. There she pursued a classical education, graduating with a B.A. in drama and English in 1952.

As an undergraduate, Gearhart contemplated the direction her life would take after graduation, and she ultimately decided to continue her education. The options for women were limited in the 1950s; having discovered her lesbianism in college, Gearhart knew that she did not want the conventional, domestic life that most of her peers pursued so dutifully. "The alternatives that I could see were to be a prostitute or a nun," or go to graduate school." She opted for the latter choice, a decision that led her to Bowling Green State University. There, she obtained a master's degree in theater and public address in 1953. Because she had her eye on teaching, Gearhart continued her graduate studies, finishing with a Ph.D. in theater at the University of Urbana Illinois in 1956.

Graduating from college propelled Gearhart into a life of academia. She began teaching speech and theater at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. While she was highly popular among the students, Gearhart's personal life was fraught with inner struggles and contradictions. She was heavily closeted, unable to reconcile her lesbianism with the conservative Lutheran climate that she was attempting to embrace. She attended parties with closeted gay male friends, hoping to throw her colleagues and acquaintances off the trail. Gearhart called her determination to hide her sexual orientation as "paranoia," describing an incident where she destroyed her lesbian novels, ripping out the pages and "casting them out the window along Highway 59. I didn't want anyone to know I was a lesbian, and those books were very incriminating." Her determination to hide her true sexual identity continued through two more teaching positions, but finally found an end when she moved to San Francisco in 1970.

San Francisco presented a world vastly different from the conservative, rural communities in Texas and the Midwest that Gearhart had inhabited so far. San Francisco was politically progressive, and it was the center of a rapidly bourgeoning homosexual community. For the first time, Gearhart felt the freedom to shout her identity in the streets. Three years after settling in California, she was hired by San Francisco State University, where she continued her academic work. This time, her attention turned from speech to the more radical field of women's studies. Gearhart played a major role in developing one of the first women and gender studies programs in the nation, and the university was the first to develop a course dealing with sex roles and communications.

Shortly thereafter, Gearhart received tenure from San Francisco State University. She had been publishing articles for some time in various movement publications, which were primarily focused on lesbianism and related political concerns. After receiving tenure, Gearhart was able to continue writing, and she also became active in the political community, fighting for radical lesbian feminist causes. In 1978, Gearhart fought alongside Harvey Milk to defeat the California Proposition 6, which was called the "Briggs Initiative." Gearhart famously debated John Briggs, attacking the initiative to ban homosexuals from academic positions with eloquence and force.

Sally Miller Gearhart papers, 1956-2015
http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv81757
In addition, Gearhart began writing science fiction novels and stories that illuminated her utopian feminist ideals to the wider lesbian community. Published in 1978, her most famous novel, Wanderground, proposed a future separatist community of women who developed psychic connections with each other and nature. The book remained in print for over twenty years and was followed by more science fiction writings. Gearhart also wrote a book entitled Loving Women/Loving Men: Gay Liberation and the Church, which was aimed at the conservative Christian churches and communities that barred homosexuals from fellowship. While Gearhart never fully embraced the Christian faith, she acknowledged its influence on her life, and she never completely turned her back on aspects of the faith that were meaningful to her.

Gearhart's involvement in homosexual rights was widespread. "I'm proud to have been a part of the movement that secured greater visibility for society's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people" she writes. However, while Gearhart was active in homosexual activism, her work was not limited to gender rights. She was also heavily involved in a number of other political causes. She was an animal rights activist, became involved in a variety of ecologically based movements, and she was also a leader in the women's spirituality movement. Her involvements are diverse and varied, but they all speak to the fact that Sally Miller Gearhart is a proponent of compassion, a woman who directs her energies wherever she feels they are most immediately needed. But her true motivation is lodged deeply within her: "Love is the universal truth lying at the heart of all creation."

Content Description

The Sally Miller Gearhart Papers contain personal and professional correspondence, the majority of which are professional in nature and deal with her work as an activist and writer. There is a prevalence of letters relating to the publishing, editing, and feedback to her literary works. Also, there are letters pertaining to her activism and politics, specifically on the subject of gay rights. The section of fan mail will be useful to those interested in correspondence relating to Wanderground. Additionally, correspondence relating to the documentary of The Times of Harvey Milk can be found within professional correspondence.

This collection also contains a small amount of papers dealing with Gearhart's academic work. These papers are relevant to researchers interested in Gearhart's role as an academic, both a writer and a professor, connected with women's studies. In here, writings can be found written by Gearhart and other individuals

The most extensive part of this collection, and perhaps the most significant, is that of Gearhart's literary works. In here several drafts of Wanderground can be found. This novel will be useful to researchers of feminist lesbian politics, utopias, and literature. In addition to this novel, the collection contains several short stories, some of which are connected to Wanderground.

Gearhart's essays, like her fictional works, are political and fairly numerous. The main themes within these essays are politics around feminism, lesbianism, and gay rights. Within these essays, researchers specifically interested in subjects of feminist rhetoric, utopias, lesbianism, and animal rights will find relevant information.

This collection also contains two plays of Gearhart's, one of which was meant to teach acting students about different kinds of plays. Among Gearhart's plays there can be found notes concerning lesbian and gay texts and her own writing on feminist rhetoric.
Gearhart's speeches can be seen as an extension of the rest of her work, addressing the intersection of lesbianism and feminism with politics, activism, religion, scholarship, and rhetoric. Additionally, these speeches contain subjects of animal rights, lesbian separatism, Harvey Milk, and gender.

Published works by Gearhart, in newspapers and magazines, can be found in this collection. These published writings are relevant to researchers interested in Gearhart's poetry, her critiques of Christianity and the church (specifically in relation to homosexuality), lesbian separatism, gay rights, coming out, Harvey Milk, feminist rhetoric, and Wanderground.

Gearhart also created some cartoons that can be found in this collection. These cartoons address issues of feminism, women's liberation, and lesbianism.

Series VIII contains material created by Sally's partner, Jane Gurko. This series contains biographical materials (curriculum vitae, college diplomas, and an obituary), selections of Gurko's own writings (including her Honors College thesis), and copies of selections of Gearhart's essays.

Use of the Collection

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Administrative Information

Arrangement


Names and Subjects

Subject Terms:
- Feminist fiction, American--Authorship
- Feminists--California--San Francisco
- Gay rights--California
- Lesbians--California--San Francisco
- Science fiction, American--Authorship
- Women authors, American--20th century
- Women college teachers--California--San Francisco
- Women college teachers--Texas
- Women political activists--California--San Francisco

Personal Names:
- Gearhart, Sally Miller, 1931-