

RHONDA M. WILLIAMS
1957–2000

In Memoriam

With great sadness we report the passing of Rhonda M. Williams on November 7, 2000. Rhonda died at her home in Maryland after a long battle with lung cancer.

Those of us who were her students, her friends, her colleagues, and her admirers will greatly miss Rhonda for her many contributions to feminist economics and feminist scholarship more generally. She was a founding Associate Editor of *Feminist Economics* (and later an Editorial Board member) after serving a stint as an editor of *Feminist Studies*, where she had contributed an economist's perspective on feminist scholarship. She also served as a board member of IAFFE for the organization's first 6 years. Most recently, she was an associate professor and acting director of the Afro-American Studies Program at the University of Maryland, College Park (USA), where she was an eloquent and inspiring teacher of both undergraduate and graduate students in many disciplines.

Rhonda's writings soon moved away from her beginnings as an MIT-trained labor economist toward a political economic analysis of racial inequality in the US. She criticized neoclassical economics and its neoconservative political offspring for a lack of methodological rigor and historical understanding. With both theoretical arguments and empirical studies, she showed that neither human capital explanations nor cultural differences could explain persistent racial inequality in the US. She and her co-authors developed an alternative to both neoclassical and more traditional Marxian explanations of employment discrimination, emphasizing instead the incentives for white workers (especially white male workers) to engage in and to accept employers' discriminatory practices in order to win out in competition for high-wage, stable jobs. Rhonda's work carefully incorporated the role of class and gender in creating and maintaining racial inequality, drawing on and contributing new insights to Marxian economic theory, as well as contributing to economists' and policymakers' understanding of the dimensions of racial inequality. (See also Deborah M. Figart's much longer discussion of Rhonda's work in the Spring 2001 issue of *The Review of Black Political Economy*.)

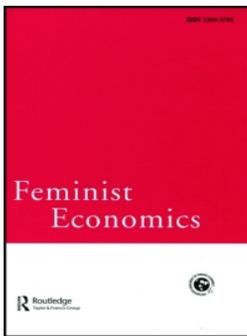
Out of all of her intellectual and personal contributions to the academic

and political worlds, one characteristic that stood out to many of us who knew her is that Rhonda was a bridge-builder. She was one of those rare individuals who had both the ability and the inclination to bring thinkers together across the differences that too easily divide us. She pushed African-American scholars and others fighting racial injustice to think about gender and sexuality. She eloquently urged white feminists to recognize and to theorize the lives of all women in the context of racism and racial/ethnic differences. More recently, Rhonda wrote and spoke about how gay and lesbian studies scholars need to create a racialized understanding of sexuality. Rhonda did not avoid the political and analytical difficulty of such ambitious projects – through her own work she showed us how our understanding of the “economics of race” or the “economics of gender” are improved by a more inclusive approach.

In remembering Rhonda, many more direct images come to mind: Rhonda rubbing her chin, thoughtfully (as always) considering a new idea. Rhonda’s laugh suddenly lightening up an otherwise awkward moment after having confronted and worked through difficult issues with others. Rhonda using a night out dancing to analyze the political economy of race in gay dance clubs in Washington, DC. Students from classes she taught at the University of Maryland (or from her earlier years at the University of Texas-Austin, Yale, or the New School) running into her at conferences or on the street – Rhonda always remembered them and they always had a story about the importance of something they had learned from Rhonda. Rhonda expressing her pride in and hopes for her two sons. Rhonda’s speaking out against injustice based on race, gender, and sexual orientation in private meetings with campus officials, at public legislative hearings, or in the national news media.

Rhonda Williams left *Feminist Economics* and IAFFE with an important legacy. As an engaged scholar, as someone willing to make connections between issues, and as someone committed to fighting injustice, Rhonda’s example and work can remind us of where we want to go as well as the paths of exclusion we should avoid, even as her works remind us of the friend and colleague whom we have lost.

Lee Badgett
on behalf of Feminist Economics



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