A poet, a philosopher, a linguist, an eighteenth-century scholar, a composition and teacher education specialist—what do these have in common? If we attach names to each—Diane Wakoski, Marilyn Frye, Geneva Smitherman, Ellen Pollak, Marilyn Wilson—it becomes clear that they are the field designations, and, much more than that, the vocational passions, of five remarkable women whose retirement after decades of service we mark in this valediction. When they began their work in the 1970s as writers and teachers, they entered a profession that was on the verge of dramatic change, and that, indeed, did change, in no small part due to their efforts. The social upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s carried over into the profession of the humanities in colleges and universities and, correspondingly, what was going on in the classrooms and the publications made contributions to social change. Professors Wakoski, Frye, Smitherman, Pollak, and Wilson were all a significant part of that change, each becoming a leader in her field by forging the new perspectives that the emergence of feminist theory, women’s studies, race studies, and new educational practices brought to the table. What the humanities are today—multidisciplinary, invested in understanding the relationship between what we read and see and the world we inhabit, committed to diversity—is due to their efforts and hundreds of other women who entered academia in the 1970s and transformed it for good, and for the better. What MSU is today, unalterably committed to these same principles, has come about in significant ways because of their leadership, teaching, research, and creativity.
How did these remarkable women help to effect these transformations? They led by example.

Geneva Smitherman, world-renowned as a cultural linguist and champion of African American English, also worked tirelessly for My Brother’s Keeper, a program to bring disadvantaged African American men in Detroit to Michigan State University, while serving as a key participant for the development of language policy in post-apartheid South Africa. Diane Wakoski, one of the most distinguished poets in America in the second half of the twentieth century, whose work brings personal experience, contemporary culture, and mythological verities into contact, also spent countless hours outside the classroom tutoring groups of highly-talented students to strive for excellence in creative expression. Marilyn Frye, whose “Politics of Reality” transformed our contemporary understanding of gender relations, remains one of the foundation stones of the critical women’s studies and feminist theory movements both internationally and locally at MSU; in the midst of an extraordinarily busy academic career, she found the time to serve as associate dean for graduate studies in the College of Arts and Letters. Equally significant in the field of women’s studies and feminist theory is Ellen Pollak, whose books on eighteenth-century literature, culture, and sexuality are essential to the transformation of a field of fundamental importance to our understanding of modern and contemporary existence; editor, scholar, inspirational teacher, Dr. Pollak also devoted her energies to serving as the graduate chairperson in the Department of English, helping to lead that program into the twenty-first century. A master teacher and teacher of teachers, Marilyn Wilson, whose important work on literacy, pedagogy, and composition has paved the way for advances in the teaching of English for over three decades, also served as president of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, as director of the program in Critical Studies in Literacy and Pedagogy, and as coordinator of the English Education program. Each of these women exemplify the very best Michigan State University has to offer: excellence in teaching; groundbreaking research; outstanding service to the university and the profession; committed and effective public service.

While it is true that the departure of these five women into well-earned and well-deserved retirements leaves a gap in the College of Arts and Letters, it is one that can be filled by promising faculty—women and men—who have been trained for the future in the progressive environments that Professors Wakoski, Smitherman, Pollak, Wilson and Frye have helped to create, with the commitments and investments in the future of the humanities, education, and society that they have fostered in their own careers. We celebrate and salute these five women, game changers all, as well as their distinguished careers and their inestimable contributions to Michigan State University.

Patrick O’Donnell
Professor and Chair of the Department of English,
College of Arts and Letters,
Michigan State University

How has your research, teaching, and public and professional service changed your field during your time at MSU?

Supported and inspired by the Women’s Liberation Movement, just a handful of women philosophers (the Society for Women in Philosophy organized c. 1971) invented a new thing: feminist philosophy. At that time, mainstream U.S. philosophy saw its process as abstract, universal, value neutral, and apolitical; it framed “woman philosopher” as a contradiction in terms and couldn’t even frame a concept of feminist philosophy. In 1973, I began devising a course that I conceived of as both a feminist philosophy course and a women’s studies course. I taught the course at MSU almost every quarter/semester for twenty years, beginning in the fall of 1974. This research and teaching was my worldly engagement as a philosopher and as a feminist committed to providing enriching, empowering education that put women at the center of thought and value.

Marilyn Frye, Ph.D.
Along with others in the department, I contributed to MSU’s philosophy department, becoming an innovative leader in socially engaged philosophical practice, inflected by feminist, anti-racist and other social justice values. What “career high” experiences do you recall taking place during your tenure at MSU? The MSU chapter of Phi Beta Kappa nominated me to be the PBK Romanell Professor in 2007-08, and I gave the Romanell Lectures in February of 2008. These are public lectures intended to contribute to the public understanding of philosophy. It was a good fit for me, given my commitment to producing philosophy and feminist theory that is accessible beyond the limits of the discipline and the academy. I gave three public lectures attended by a wonderful mix of people from MSU and my wider Lansing/East Lansing feminist and lesbian communities. I addressed fundamental questions about what/who feminism is about: what kind of social group or political entity is WOMEN? If it is not just a biological category (most feminists think it is not), then what is it? If it is a social construction, what is this constructed “thing”? What is “being a woman,” what is “being a…[any social identity]”? I experienced the lectures and the gala reception for all of the guests (supported by MSU) as a great opportunity and a deeply gratifying celebration of my own work and my community.

What do you see as the societal impact of your work? The women’s movement in the U.S. transformed the culture/society in many ways and continues to do so (now, in the face of backlash). My work is part of that movement. Like many other academics, I have contributed more through students’ actions and engagements than directly by my own. Some students who attribute their awakening or inspiration to my courses have gone on to much more direct, at-the-barricades activism for women than I have the courage or temperament for. I know of one well-funded researcher of violence against women who found feminism in my course; another is a rising power in innovative secondary education. Some of the writings in my 1983 book have been continuously in use in women’s studies and philosophy classrooms for almost 30 years, now. Like most educators and theorists, my work doesn’t so much make an impact as it has diffuse influence. One never knows how much, or how beneficial.

ELLEN POLLAK, PH.D.

How has your research, teaching, and public and professional service changed your field during your time at MSU? Although I was a literature major at a progressive women’s college in the 1960s, I can’t remember reading a single work of literature by a woman writer while I was there—or ever addressing how women were represented in the works we read by men. Things weren’t much different when I entered graduate school, but they were on the cusp of change. When courageous literary critics of the 1970s like Kate Millet and Ellen Moers began to bring feminist questions to bear on the traditional literary canon and to revise that canon by bringing serious scholarly attention to women’s writing, they opened up thrilling new horizons for those of us entering literary studies and
inaugurated an intellectual movement that would change the profession and the humanities in profound and irreversible ways.

I am proud to have been a part of the generation of scholars who worked to bring about that change by dedicating my career, including my 22 years at MSU, to producing new knowledge about women and literature, and disseminating it to generations of students (both male and female), many of whom now teach in secondary schools, colleges, and universities throughout the nation and the world. The advent of what was first called “the new scholarship on women”—and later feminist, women’s, or gender studies—has brought about a sea change in higher education, where courses on women, gender, and sexuality now constitute an intrinsic part of the humanities curriculum; questions of gender figure significantly across many disciplines; and textbook publishers routinely issue classroom editions and anthologies of literature by women across the centuries.

What “career high” experiences do you recall taking place during your tenure at MSU?

After delivering a talk on “The Future of Feminist Theory in 18th-Century Studies” at the national meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) in 2008, I was approached by a young woman I had never met, who was eager to share the following story with me. She had just had her first job interview for a faculty position, and the search committee had asked her, “If you could have written any ‘first book’ in the field, which one would you want it to have been?” She said she had had no trouble answering; she would have written my first book, “The Poetics of Sexual Myth: Gender and Ideology in the Verse of Swift and Pope” (Chicago, 1985).

What could be more gratifying than to hear such words from a young scholar about a book I had published almost 25 years earlier? It wasn’t just that the young woman was an admirer of my work, or even that the book was still being taught and read; it was also that she was registering something important about the role the book had played in the history of our field—and in her personal development as a scholar.

Those of us who embarked on the project of redefining knowledge and the curriculum early on were not always embraced with open arms—especially in traditional fields like mine. Working at the intersection of 18th-C studies and feminist studies was a bit like mountain climbing—exhilarating but also challenging; and undertaking a feminist reading of the two most canonical male poets of the English eighteenth century, as I had done, incurred some risk. Although most reviews of my book were positive, even words of praise could be equivocal. One reviewer said I “grappled womanfully” with Swift. Another, who seemed to half-admire my “aggressively cerebral” prose, found himself at a loss for words to describe the book’s effect: “If I thought the author would take it as a compliment, I would use the adjective ‘seminal.’”

Given this kind of back-handed reception, the fact that an emerging scholar in 2008 would emulate my work—and trust that she would impress a search committee by doing so—was a cheering and rewarding experience.

How do you feel the role of women in the profession has changed during your career?

Without a doubt, intellectual change has brought institutional change, and more women are prominent in my field than they were 30 or 40 years ago. ASECS, founded in 1969, had not a single female president during its first decade; in contrast, since 1998, seven of its ten presidents have been women. But disparities in salary and rates of promotion across gender and race persist in the profession. We still need to foster feminist community in our academic homes and to mentor and support students and colleagues who continue to fight for equity and who sometimes experience battle fatigue.

At the same time, there is certainly a greater understanding of the aims and character of feminist inquiry inside the academy than outside it. That feminist scholars must routinely spend time dispelling popular myths about what has come to be the new “F” word (feminism) in undergraduate classrooms suggests that there is still plenty of work for us to do in educating the general public.

What do you see as the societal impact of your work?

I am currently editing “A Cultural History of Women in the Age of Enlightenment” as part of a six-volume “Cultural History of Women” forthcoming from Berg publishers in 2013. The series of interdisciplinary volumes consolidates the new understandings of cultural history produced by feminist scholars over the past decade and targets undergraduate students and general readers. In my volume, nine seasoned scholars (including myself) have produced a basic reference work in a field that didn’t exist when most of us were students. A work that would have been
unimaginable only 40 years ago now has the cultural authority of standard knowledge. This move toward educating general readers in the new knowledge that the academy has been producing seems to me the condition for societal change, and I am honored to be a part of it.

I hope that over time the broad implications of my 2003 book, “Incest and the English Novel, 1684-1814,” will reach a more general public. The book uses readings of early novels about incest to expose the historical (as opposed to the natural or necessary) basis of incest and to shed light on the relationship between those faulty assumptions and modern normative conceptions of gender, sexuality, desire, and social power. It is certainly aimed at changing the way we think and act in the world.

GENEVA SMITHERMAN, PH.D.,
University Distinguished Professor Emerita of English

Co-founder, former acting director, and current executive committee member, African American and African Studies
Core Faculty, African Studies Center

How has your research, teaching, and public and professional service changed your field during your time at MSU?

I came of age during the Civil Rights-Black Power Era and was a member of the first group of faculty in Harvard University’s “Afro-American Studies Department” (as the department was known in those days), that had been born out of the struggles and sacrifices of Harvard’s Black students. At the same historical moment, in the field of Sociolinguistics, I began a life-long commitment to research on African American Language (AAL) and to the broader language rights struggle embodied in “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” the policy of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), that I helped formulate. Later, I co-founded and chaired for 23 years CCCC’s Language Policy Committee, which seeks to intervene in negative language attitudes and teaching practices for speakers of marginalized languages. Early on, I developed my signature communication style reflecting the flora of AAL in my books, articles and speeches in order to make the medium match the message of language equality. I promote bi/multilingualism—for all Americans. As Alim and I note throughout “Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the United States” (Oxford University Press, October, 2012): “Barack Obama regularly switches between multiple ways of speaking—without devaluing any of them...In this sense...he serves as a linguistic role model not just for Black Americans but for all Americans.”

My work in Sociolinguistics has expanded the conceptualization of Black Language beyond language structure (grammar, pronunciation) to encompass language use (discourse, rhetoric, ways of speaking). My research and professional leadership have had perhaps their greatest impact outside Sociolinguistics, for instance, in Composition and Rhetoric, English Language Arts and Literary Studies (e.g., Henry Louis Gates’s “Signifyin(g) Monkey”). My mentoring has contributed to the emergence of a generation of teacher-scholars—Carol Lee, Keith Gilyard, David Kirkland, Elaine Richardson, H. Samy Alim, Austin Jackson, to name a few—who represent the leaders of the new school, whose work builds and significantly rests upon mine.

My work in the Black Intellectual Tradition, coupled with my founding and directorship of My Brother’s Keeper (1990-2011), a male mentoring program for middle school students in the Detroit Public Schools, have contributed to advancing African American and African Studies’ (AAAS) founding goal of “academic excellence and social responsibility.” My work as a co-founder of MSU’s AAAS Program, one of 12 doctoral programs in the field and the only one in the State of Michigan, has contributed to the twenty-first century reconceptualization of academic and intellectual relevance in higher education.

What “career high” experience(s) do you recall taking place during your tenure at MSU?

In 1995, I began work in the “new” South Africa, at the “historically disadvantaged” University of Bophuthatswana (nicknamed “Bop,” now North West University
at Mafikeng–NWUM). This led to a partnership with MSU to enhance the research and publishing skills and broaden the professional horizons of Bop English Department faculty. In 2001, I received a generous grant from the Spencer Foundation to further this work. Working with MSU colleague Dr. Susan Gass, we brought the entire English faculty to the MSU campus for the month-long Institute in Language Research and Teaching for North West University Faculty, including a trip to the University of Toronto’s internationally acclaimed language teaching unit. Following the Institute, several NWUM faculty had international conference papers accepted and/or published refereed journal articles. Four went on to complete doctoral degrees.

**How do you feel the role of women in the profession has changed during your career?**

Although women have historically been sidelined in most of the disciplines of the Academy and in traditional professional organizations, they have played a leadership role in the National Council of Black Studies (NCBS) from its inception, and over the decades, women have participated in the intellectual development of the AAAS field. The same cannot be said for Sociolinguistics (nor Theoretical Linguistics nor English Studies). However, with the broader social transformation of American society in the 1960s and ’70s, initiated by the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement, increase in and elevation of women in Sociolinguistics, as well as in other academic fields, was inevitable. Women are now acclaimed not only for being practitioners, but also for their contributions to the development and formulation of theory and their advancement of their fields. While the “first woman” syndrome is pretty much a thing of the past in the Academy, and while women have definitely made significant advancements in all fields and professions, recent research suggests that this progress has slowed, if not downright halted, over the past 15 years.

**What do you see as the societal impact of your work?**

My work as chief advocate and linguistic expert witness for the children in *King vs. Ann Arbor*, the federal court case popularly known as “The Black English Case,” had a decided societal impact in this country and abroad, provoking intense debates and dialogue as well as extensive national and international media attention (e.g., “Today Show,” “People Magazine,” “New York Times,” “National Public Radio”). Given the U.K.’s Afro-Diasporic communities and attendant language issues, a team of British journalists and educators filmed the National Invitational Symposium that I convened on King and produced a film about King.

This court case, coupled with my first book, “Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America” (1977 and still in print), helped spearhead a re-examination of school language policies and ignited a national on-going discussion about the value of language diversity in modern society. Over the decades, I took the language rights struggle outside academe, appearing in such media venues as “Phil Donahue,” “Dick Cavett,” “Oprah,” “CNN Talk Back Live,” and “CBS Reports,” stimulating a national conversation about the language rights of Blacks and other People of Color.

In this twenty-first century, now that the mainstream has crossed over to the hood (and not the other way around, as Hip Hop icon and businessman Jay-Z reminds us), Black Language ranks as Global English. With this burgeoning interest in and embrace of AAL, my work has become a standard reference for linguistic authority on the subject, and is cited and referred to by folks from all walks of life, including writers and poets, preachers, Hip Hop headz, lay people, community activists, K-12 teachers, community college students, university graduate and undergraduate students. I continue to receive numerous letters, postcards and email messages about African American Language, and language in general, not only from people across the U.S., but also from abroad—e.g., Germany, China, Japan, Poland, the Netherlands, Spain, the U.K., Jamaica, Italy.

**DIANE WAKOSKI, PH.D.**

**How has your research, teaching, and public and professional service changed your field during your time at MSU?**

During my 37-year tenure at MSU, where I started in 1975 as a sort of hot young woman poet, my presence in the field (along with the other...)

**5 Women 50 Years**
women writing poetry whom Alicia Ostriker described in her critical book, “STEALING THE LANGUAGE”), has opened the poetry world, so that not only a great many women populate the once male-dominated field, but it has also helped open the poetry world to a huge divergence of voices, racial, cultural, and gender-identified.

Before I entered academia, the poets who taught in universities and colleges were often marginalized, called “academic poets” (definitely a pejorative term). When I came to MSU after a number of Visiting Poets semesters at about a dozen universities, including Emory, U of Virginia, U of Washington, and U of Hawaii, I decided that I would try to change that. I wanted to bring the glamour of my life as a traveling poet, on the road, giving 60-80 poetry readings a year, to my now tenured job as a poetry professor, to make people feel they were getting “the real deal,” not someone who just studied but a woman who lived her poetry. I think I was part of a generation of poets who brought this literary excitement to the academic world.

In my case, I loved teaching undergraduates and tried to make MSU a place where undergraduate poets were taken seriously. I never desired, as so many of my colleagues in the poetry world did, to teach graduate students or to be part of an MFA program. Though always scholarly, I have never considered myself an academic. I have wanted professing poetry to be as personal as art is, as intimate, as uncompromising, and offering a refreshment of the traditional. As a result, something I never expected to happen did indeed occur: I found that my work with young poets became charged. It carried weight. It added up, in a way I never expected. Writing poetry is a life of increments. You build small entities that become larger ones. The irony I have witnessed in my own life, which reflects an irony I see in the poetry world at large, is that just as poets are almost not taken seriously anymore if they don’t have a university or college affiliation, I see my “poetry-professing” life as being of a significance I formerly would only have attributed to my poetry.

What “career high” experiences do you recall taking place during your tenure at MSU?

As a result, in retrospect, I suppose that the “career high” experience that took place during my tenure at MSU was being named one of the original University Distinguished Professors. Asking several dozen distinguished names in the poetry field to write brief recommendations for me resulted in my feeling much more esteemed than I had thought I was.

To be candid, the career high I have been wishing and waiting for all my poetry life, since I was 21, is the Pulitzer Prize. I used to be angry. Then, sad. It has never yet come. But I wondered if perhaps my life with students at MSU, which came about through my poetry, just as Pulitzer would have had I gotten one, was really the career high?

How has your research, teaching, and public and professional service changed your field during your time at MSU?

My professional career at MSU—focused on teaching, research, and university/community service—has spanned 41 years, with scholarship centered on literacy development and the theory and social practice of language. My research has been widely disseminated through the co-authorship of three books focused on the teaching of reading/literacy, composition studies, and the politics of language, all of which have supported secondary teachers of English throughout the country. Because much of my research and teaching has focused on the complex interplay of culture and language within the teaching of English, I am part of a movement that asks teacher educators and their English education students to recognize and respond to the social and political issues of cultural and linguistic diversity in English teaching. An area of study
that illustrates how my research and teaching come together is my work on “hate speech,” and how it impacts both those who use it and those who are its targets. My research exemplifies the situated nature of English education studies within a larger cultural context.

My tenure at MSU has also changed the field of English education within the University by making it more community-based and outreach-focused. As director of Critical Studies in Literacy and Pedagogy for many years, I organized Manuscript Day, a writing workshop for middle school students, each semester. With the help of the English Language Center I set up partnerships for my language study students to work with ELC students. An annual event that the English education program sponsored, and I organized, was the Spring Conference on the English Language Arts for pre-service and in-service teachers. We engaged our graduate students and often our undergraduates in presenting at and attending this conference, along with the Michigan Council of Teachers of English Conference every year. I also involved undergraduate English education students in an arts-literacy program at one of the elementary schools in Okemos for several semesters, where our students worked with elementary children on arts/literacy connections. Outreach is now a central focus of English education.

What “career high” experiences do you recall taking place during your tenure at MSU?

“Career highs” include winning the Michigan Council of Teachers of English Charles Carpenter Fries Award for my contributions to English education in the state of Michigan; the National Council of Teachers of English Rewey Belle Inglis Award honoring my work nationally, and other teaching awards at MSU. A “career high” for me, however, is less a snapshot of a moment than a wider view that showcases the impact of my work on English education throughout the state and nation. It is gratifying to see dozens of former doctoral students in colleges and universities around the state and nation who are having an impact in their own spheres of teaching and learning.

Also gratifying is seeing how my cross-disciplinary work in English education has helped to create an atmosphere of collegiality and community in MSU’s English education programs that was not present when I began my tenure at MSU in the early ’80s. Targeting the insularity and territoriality present in those early years, I helped to develop connections with other departments through serving on search committees, designing courses that would attract inter-departmental graduate students, and serving as co-leader of Teachers for a New Era (TNE) that brought together professors from various disciplines to revise English/Language Arts education at MSU.

I think I came to be viewed as a bridge builder in the shaping of English language arts within the university. Based on my work in TNE, I was invited to Concepción, Chile, in 2005 as a curriculum consultant for Chile’s standards development for Spanish language arts, modeled on the literacy standards for teachers developed in the Teachers for a New Era project.

How do you feel the role of women in the profession has changed during your career?

Although women have played a prominent role in my field of English education studies for decades, that hasn’t always been true in the disciplines. Leading by example, women in English education in their disciplinary departments have assumed leadership roles in teaching and administration, scholarship, and service/outreach. I served as the Department of English undergraduate associate chair for four years, as director of the Critical Studies in Literacy and Pedagogy program for several years, and as a co-leader of the MSU Literacy Team for Teachers for a New Era.

What do you see as the societal impact of your work?

I have taught, mentored, and directed the dissertations of 25 doctoral students and served on the committees of twice that number. Our graduate programs have placed English educators in colleges and universities around the state and nation, and those professors have, in turn, helped to change the nature of English education on a national level from an exclusively methods-based pedagogy to one that situates teaching and learning within culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

My leadership roles at the state and national levels include: president of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English; membership on several state-wide and national committees for K-12 English standards and English education standards; workshops for teacher/student assessment in Beijing, China, and Concepcion, Chile. These experiences suggest a vast sphere of influence on English education instruction and assessment around the state, the nation, and beyond.