



news

USC CENTER FOR FEMINIST RESEARCH

Interim Director's Message

by Lisa Bitel

In last year's newsletter I wrote as Interim Director of the Center for Feminist Research to announce that the death of feminism(s) and the Center for Feminist Research at USC had been greatly exaggerated. CFR was then just beginning its new mission as a sponsor of thematic annual scholarly seminars and a funder of ongoing research projects by USC faculty and advanced graduate students.

As I write this year—as Chair of Gender Studies but merely one member of the CFR Steering Committee, which also currently includes Judith Bennett (History), Sarah Banet-Weiser (Communications), Ellen Seiter (Cinema), and Alice Gambrell (English)—I am proud to announce the success of the first annual CFR New Directions in Feminist Research Seminar, “Mediated Identities,” led by Professor Alice Gambrell (English). By the time you read these words, Professor Gambrell will have completed her year as Seminar Director and hosted a showcase of the research projects carried out by the 2008-09 New Directions Fellows, Velina Hasu Houston (Theatre), Aniko Imre (Critical Studies), Tara McPherson (GSP and Critical Studies), and D. Travers Scott (Annenberg). Meanwhile, the call has gone out for next year's Seminar on “Intersectional

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ALICE GAMBRELL (ENGLISH), 2008-09 SEMINAR DIRECTOR

“Mediated Identities” Seminar

Since the start of the 2008-09 academic year, I have been meeting with a small group of faculty and graduate students in seminar sessions devoted to the topic of “Mediated Identities.” The 2008-09 seminar is the first iteration of CFR's “New Directions in Feminist Scholarship” program, which supports individual and collaborative research projects grounded in questions about gender and/or sexuality. The program—which will conclude its first year with a day-long series of public events held at the School of Theatre on May 5—represents a strategic shift in the Center's mission. Whereas CFR, throughout its history, has served primarily as a programming unit and secondarily as a provider of funding for student and faculty work in progress, with the launch of NDFS, the Center's priority has shifted to project funding.

Each year, a new NDFS director proposes a topic and (along with CFR's steering committee) selects fellows from a university-wide call. The broader purpose of the 2008-09 seminar, as I conceived

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Lisa Bitel, *continued from page 1*

Solidarity” under the leadership of Ange-Marie Hancock (Political Science.)

From its origins, CFR has aimed to bring scholars of feminism and gender from across the disciplines together for exchange and collaboration. In partnership with its sister organization, the USC Gender Studies Program, CFR has always provided a home for the feminist project at USC. While CFR now focuses efforts on a yearly research seminar rather than offering a regular calendar of research events, the Gender Studies Program has assumed some of the Center’s previous duties of public programming and outreach on feminist and gender-related topics. During the 2008-09 academic years, thanks to its new GS Advisory Board of forty-plus faculty-members and administrators from across the USC campuses, the Program extended its reach to fresh audiences. Its “Lunch through the Lens of Gender” Series drew packed audiences to two panels during the past year. In October, about 150 faculty and students jammed the Intellectual Commons at Doheny Library to hear Karen Tongson (GSP), Susan Estrich (Law), and Judy Muller (Journalism) discuss the “Palinization of Politics.” And in April, Provost Max Nikias, Professor Maja Mataric’, and Professor Ubli Mitra (all from Viterbi School of Engineering), along with Linda Jones (Director, Picker Engineering Program, Smith College), joined together in a second panel to ask “What Does Gender Have to Do with Engineering?” The Provost’s comments, which lay out an admirable agenda for promoting gender equity in engineering and other hard science fields, are printed elsewhere in this newsletter.

Meanwhile, research on feminist and gender-related topics continues in departments, programs, centers, and institutes around USC. To what end, you might ask? Mike Messner (GSP and Sociology), aided by Laura Fugikawa (doctoral student in ASE and a GS Graduate Certificate student) conducted a survey of GS Graduate Certificate alums to find answers to exactly that question. The

results are conclusive: the GSP’s Graduate Certificate program lures doctoral students to USC, enriches their experience in graduate school, and helps them find satisfying jobs after they graduate. Professor Messner’s survey report is published on our website.

At this moment of economic uncertainty and renewed political hope, it is equally gratifying to long-time feminist scholars and the new generation of feminists and gender scholars to know that what we all do is not only meaningful but recognized as valuable by employers both inside and outside of academe. The intellectual and personal is still political and, what’s more, remain crucial to the wellbeing of our local, national and global communities.

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THROUGH THE LENS OF GENDER:

What does gender have to do with engineering?

USC Provost Max Nikias joined Urbashi Mitra and Maja J Mataric from the Viterbi School of Engineering and Linda Jones, Director and Chair of the Picker Engineering Program as well as Rosemary Bradford Hewlett Professor of Engineering at Smith College for our spring 2009 Lunch through the Lens of Gender panel discussion. The Provost argued that administrators, faculty, and society more generally must collaborate to make the academic sciences more gender-equitable.

It’s a privilege for me to be a part of this panel. I come to share some thoughts about today’s issue... But I also come to listen. And as I talk, and as I listen, I do so while bringing the perspective of a Provost, obviously ... and a previous dean of engineering... and an NSF ERC Center director... and a professor... and also as the parent of two daughters who attend this university. So I have eagerly awaited this opportunity to join all of you today. And I thank Lisa Bitel for the invitation!

If I may begin by sharing my perspective as an engineer, I would like to point out what attracted me to the profession. Engineering is about problem-solving:

- Solving the most urgent problems of our day.
- Anticipating problems of the future.
- Always looking for new opportunities to invent, and to innovate.

This is a remarkable vocation, and a rewarding one... And yet it has, for too long, been the specialization of only a portion of our population. I look forward to seeing the field of engineering reach a new dynamic maturity... which will happen when we finally incorporate the full spectrum of perspectives and experiences into it. It is a tremendous loss to academia and to society that women have long been significantly underrepresented in this field. I believe we must stay focused on a higher vision, in which this field of engineering—this field of problem-solving—fully utilizes the talents of our society’s women. This obviously applies to every part of our campus—to law, medicine, business, the arts, and so on.

But today’s discussion confirms how we have some specific issues that we must address strategically to remove obstacles from the path of young women who might have a passion and real talent for this profession. Also, let’s remember the critical role that science, math and technology will play in the coming century.

We have three great technological frontiers that are calling American research universities:

- First, and most importantly, is medicine and biology
- Second, the search for new energy sources.
- And third, the ongoing digital media and communications revolution.

Engineering will be a major player in all three of these revolutions, which will shape the world that our daughters and sons live in. That makes it all the more essential that we draw our daughters into the making of this world. I do believe that university leaders, around America, need to continue to ask the question, “Why have science and technology and math failed to attract women in equal numbers to men?”

We all know that the answer to this question involves a range of issues. We need to understand the social and cultural environments that are discouraging women from joining in—whether at the age of 5 or the age of 18. And we need to continue with concrete steps that are beginning to draw more young women in... these steps require sustained and disciplined efforts on the part of an entire academic community!

It takes leadership at the highest level of the university structure. Senior officers must articulate the importance of the full representation of women. This also requires leadership within our engineering schools: Deans must be proactive and aggressive in hiring. And they must be intolerant of academic cultures that discourage the full participation of women. And I believe that USC’s WiSE Program is a wonderful model. I was very proud of a *Chronicle of Higher Education* feature a few years ago that spotlighted WiSE’s ability to mentor and support women engineers. This fall, our Vice Provost and WiSE director Jean Morrison discussed USC’s WiSE efforts as part of a panel on Women’s Leadership and Diversity at a Global HR Forum in Seoul, Korea. And U.S. News & World Report has featured WiSE’s family-friendly grant programs for our Ph.D. students. WiSE continues to sponsor the development of networking groups across campus in a variety of disciplinary fields, faculty and postdoctoral networking groups.

It begins to show what can be accomplished. But again, it requires the entire leadership of a university be pushing in the same direction. It not only takes leadership from the central university and the deans, it requires the same from department Chairs and individual faculty. And we also need to speak to the larger society, especially to parents who may themselves not be convinced that science or engineering or math are worthwhile fields for their daughters. That is why I commend you for this hosting this important discussion—where again, I hope to listen and learn. Thank you.

C. L. Max Nikias, *Executive Vice President & Provost*

NEW BOOKS

Joseph Boone is the recipient M. H. Abrams Fellowship and NEH Fellowship at the National Humanities Center in Durham, NC, for the academic year 2009-10, to work on his book project "The Homoerotics of Orientalism." He has also received one of the "Advanced Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities" Awards from the Office of the USC Provost for the same project, as well as a Voices and Visions Grant for "The Melville Project," which will stage two theatrical events, one in fall 2009 and one in 2010. consist of fall and spring components.

Here are talks I've given in the last year, through this summer:

"Modernist Re-Orientations: Imagining Homoerotic Desire in the Nearly Middle East," Univ. of Michigan (Sept. 2008).

"Adapting Melville, Adapting Apocalypse: The Confidence-Man as Musical." American Studies Association of Turkey Conference: "Adapting America/America Adapted," Bogacizi Univ., Istanbul, Turkey (Oct. 2008).

"Devilish Disjunctions: Melville and the American Musical" (with Robert Vorlicky), for Special Session on "Performing Words: the Adaptation, Transformation, and Performance of a Literary Work on Stage," MLA (Dec. 2008).

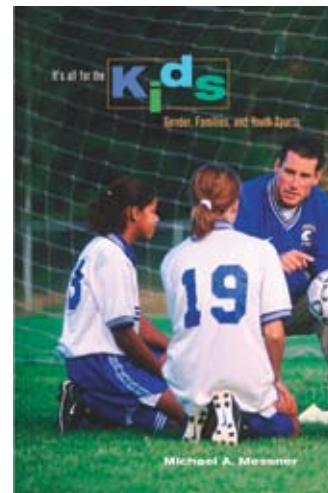
"Orientalism, the Middle East, and the Homoerotic Gaze in the Visual Arts," Guest Lecturer, Consortium Seminar: "'Contact Visions: Orientalism, Photography, and the Middle East," Getty Museum and Library (March 2009).

Diana Blaine delivered a paper at the Cultural Studies Conference in Kansas City this month called "'Man Up': The Rhetoric of Dominant Masculinity on Dr Phil." In March Blaine spoke on "Media, Women and Leadership" at the USC Women's Leadership Retreat in Forest Falls. Diana Blaine has also been promoted to Associate Professor, Teaching, in the Writing Program at USC.

Michael A. Messner (2009) *It's All For The Kids: Gender, Families and Youth Sports*. Berkeley: University of California Press

Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, eds. (2010) *Men's Lives*, Eighth Edition. Allyn & Bacon.

Michael Messner currently serves as President of the Pacific Sociological Association, and as Chair of the Sex and Gender Section of the American Sociological Association.



Nancy Lutkehaus Fascinates with New Book

Margaret Mead: The Making of an American Icon

by Susan Andrews



USC College Professor of Anthropology Nancy Lutkehaus reads from her new book, *Margaret Mead: The Making of an American Icon*

In her latest book, *Margaret Mead: The Making of an American Icon*, USC College Professor of Anthropology Nancy Lutkehaus expertly researches and draws upon scholarly papers, newspaper clippings, magazine articles, photographs, films and television to tell an intriguing and powerful story.

Mead (1901–78), an American cultural icon, prolific writer and anthropologist popularized anthropology in the media. She first entered the public scene with her book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), which brought instant fame while causing much debate. Mead's book is considered by many to be one of the century's most influential academic works.

But why did Lutkehaus choose to write a book about Mead when there are so many already? In her introductory chapter, Lutkehaus offers readers an explanation after stating that her book is neither a biography nor a hagiography.

"There are a couple of things that make my book different from others about Mead," Lutkehaus explained. "Mine is the first to be written about her by an anthropologist. Rather than a biography, however, I have chosen to look at her as an anthropologist might look at a culture hero in another society, asking the question: Why did an anthropologist in particular become so famous? What was it about her work, her life, and her messages that intrigued American

society about their own country during the 20th century?"

Lutkehaus identifies Mead as the New Woman, the Anthropologist/Adventurer, the Scientist and the Public Intellectual. She writes that the book is a study of the various images of Mead that have circulated in popular culture during the 20th century and the meanings ascribed to the different social selves individuals have attributed to her.

Mead, according to Lutkehaus, was adamant about the fact that anthropology could also be practiced "at home" in one's own society.

"As she said, 'Everything is anthropology!' In the second half of her career she wrote more about American society than she did about non-Western societies," Lutkehaus said. "What she became famous for was her ability to use insights that she gained from other societies to reflect upon ways in which American society could change for the better."

Lutkehaus was both a student of and an assistant to Mead, who worked at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City for 50 years. While employed at the museum, Lutkehaus was inspired by Mead to complete her dissertation research in Papua New Guinea.

Lutkehaus' fifth book was officially launched on Nov. 13 at the American Museum of Natural History. The kickoff for Anthropology Now, a new popular magazine published to inform people about current issues in anthropology, was part of the event. Mead's daughter and granddaughter also participated.

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* highlighted Lutkehaus book in their Nov. 28 issue, and the Times Higher Education Supplement recently featured Lutkehaus' book as its "Book of the Week" citing it as intriguing and thought-provoking a biography as one could wish for.

To read the entire book description or introduction, visit press.princeton.edu.



Los Angeles Times Pop Culture Critic, Ann Powers discusses Britney, Rihanna and the future of feminist pop cultural critique.

AN EXCERPT FROM

YOU BETTER THINK: why feminist cultural criticism still matters in a "post-feminist," peer-to-peer world

Keynote address to this year's Women in Higher Education luncheon.

Ann Powers

*Artist in Residence at
The Popular Music Project
USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center*

You may ask the old-fashioned rock critic's question: what does any of this have to do with music? Have your doubts, say what they do is disposable pop. But in each case, it's music that made us care about these people. Chris Brown became the most commercially successful pop singer of 2008 by using his dancer's light sense of rhythm and teen-age boy's feeling for irresistible desire to craft hits like "With You" and "No Air." Rihanna's story tugs our hearts, in part, because of the tenderness of her biggest hit, a story of dependable love, "Umbrella." Adam Lambert will hang on to his Idol spot only if the American public realizes

this is the most powerful voice to hit the show since Fantasia's. And Britney—over a decade, that tiny, insinuating, dirty-angel voice of hers has imprinted itself on our psyches, as powerfully as a certain movie star's, "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" did two decades before she was born.

I've just given you a dose of my daily medicine as a pop critic for a major metropolitan newspaper.

It's my job to take seriously what others find frivolous, to find the meat in the music and stories that largely operate as diversions for other. That's not the only way to participate in what's become

my life's work. Others become champions for under-sung geniuses and obscure communities, helping find audiences for deserving music that never made it into the mainstream.

Still others take on the role of amanuensis to musicians themselves, telling their stories in biographies and graciously challenging interviews, digging into the details of the creative process.

Some critics devote themselves to local scenes, becoming talent scouts and cheerleaders for the sounds in their own backyard. And there are those who do feel that their task to make a canon, to pull out what's timeless from the deluge of recorded music and devise systems to assess and rank it, so that it may live on in some definitive encyclopedia or hall of fame.

I've tried most of those approaches during the lifetime I've spent writing about music and culture. For now, the one that's most interesting has to do with chasing contradictions right in the middle of the mainstream.

Contradiction: that's the name of the game in pop criticism, because unlike high art, which maintains itself through long-established institutions and an underlying dedication to hierarchies of both taste and education, pop is messy, all-welcoming, generally amoral and addicted to the new. I continue to write about pop, in part, because it's a subject that allows me to write about everything, and to never question my own right, as a thinker, to make a noise.

I also stand up as a feminist pop critic not only because being a feminist is fundamental to everything I do, but because that position is the most excitingly contradictory of all. Pop music is the place where sexuality is most clearly on display in our culture, in all of

its polymorphous, joyful disruptive and often disturbing glory. It's also where racial and sexual stereotypes have proliferated, been challenged and morphed into different forms over a long history that began with minstrelsy and burlesque and has now seemingly come full circle with the likes of pop stars T-Pain and the Pussycat Dolls. To write about this material is to confront our deepest fears and dearest fantasies about pleasure and freedom. Sometimes it's ugly stuff. Sometimes it's hard to believe it can go as far as it does. But pop never allows for my sensibilities to harden, or for my ideology to overcome my intuition—it's too loud, too fresh with its tongue in my ear, for that.

The daunting task pop critics faced when the form was invented back in the 1960s—to prove this subject matter was worthy of serious inquiry at all, and then to determine the right voice in which to write, a tone that could express passion and humor, and be both informal and deep—persists. No pop critic has ever won a Pulitzer Prize, for example. But partly because of the legacy of great writers like Ellen Willis, Greil Marcus and Nelson George, and partly because their generation, which first embraced popular music as a source of spiritual succor and a catalyst for social change, has now inherited the earth, I'm not the outlaw I might have been twenty years ago. I'm standing here before you, aren't I? It's a long way from the bathroom at the old New York punk club CBGB's, with no doors on the stalls.

Yet just as we've reached that sought after, potentially deadly goal—legitimacy—the very structures that make serious pop criticism possible are crumbling. I'm not here to talk about the disintegration of print media; I'm sure you can find a dozen other talks

on that subject somewhere close by this month. I strongly believe that, whatever form our thoughts take, those of us who must continue to write seriously will find a way to do so. By the same token, times of scarcity rarely benefit marginal voices, and as far as feminists have come, in pop we remain mostly on the edges. I do worry that the niche-ification of the blogosphere and the decline of general interest publications will adversely affect the diversity of voices speaking and writing about the culture we consume.

Another problem facing feminist thinkers in all areas is the disempowerment of the term "feminist" itself. Many daughters of the second wave—especially those gifted and traditionally attractive enough to find success within mainstream popular culture—often find feminist criticism oppressive. "There's a stigma around feminism that's a little bit man-hating," the newly-minted dance pop queen Lady GaGa said in a recent Entertainment Weekly interview, "and I don't promote hatred, ever." She went on to say in that interview that because we have a black president, feminism may now be outmoded.

Older feminists pull their unbleached hair out over such declarations, but we need to recognize that younger women's experiences may be different than ours, that while only one look at that photograph of Rihanna's bruised face reminds us that sexual violence and oppression still exists, that the threat may feel different to girls who have always been told (by their feminist moms) that they can do anything. Again, contradictions: we'd do well to dwell on them, and talk about them with our younger friends and daughters, who can help us see how they manifest now.

“Mediated Identities”

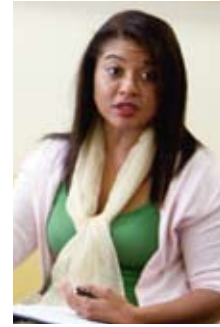
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it, was to place Media Studies scholars working in traditional (print-based) scholarly forms in dialogue with scholars producing projects in non-traditional forms; I hoped to constitute a group whose approaches would range widely, setting the scene for productive exchange and for mutual interrogation. USC, as is well-known, has long been a vanguard institution for the development of alternative (and often electronic) scholarly forms. From Marsha Kinder's path-breaking explorations of interactive scholarship at the Labyrinth Project, to the inception of the Institute for Multimedia Literacy (where students learn to think of scholarly “authorship” as a practice that exceeds the boundaries of the print essay), to the electronic journal *Vectors*, edited by Tara McPherson, USC has often embraced a spirit of profound experimentalism. What is less often noted is the extent to which these and other, related projects by USC faculty (including GS Chair Lisa Bitel's “Monastic Matrix” database) have been guided by scholars whose work is closely affiliated with Gender Studies methodologies and with feminist scholarship.

My hopes were more than fulfilled: the responses to our Call for Proposals, issued late last spring, demonstrated beyond our expectations that this experimental, risk-taking spirit extends across the University, at both the faculty and graduate student levels. (We received 23 proposals for 4 fellowships.) I brought to the seminar table a group of overarching questions having to do with identity, mediation, and scholarly practice: (1) to what extent has



Andrea Rodriguez, graduate student, School of Cinematic Arts, Interactive Media Division



Velina Hasu Houston, School of Theatre.



Aniko Imre, School of Cinematic Arts

Gender Studies scholarship, since its earliest days (long before the emergence of desktop publishing, digital information design, and widespread Internet connectivity) supported the development of non-traditional scholarly forms?; (2) is there something about the (inter) discipline of Gender Studies that makes it particularly amenable to nontraditional publication forms and venues?; (3) given the prominence of electronic scholarship in the transformation of contemporary modes of academic publication, what can we learn both about practical feminist considerations (e.g. the under-representation of women in Engineering and Computer Science) as well as about more theoretical ones (e.g., do longstanding feminist-theoretical concerns about materiality and the body bear some connection to emerging questions about the formal vehicles through which scholarly knowledge gets embodied and disseminated?).

Most surprising and gratifying to me was the fact that so many of the responses to our call came from people working in both traditional and non-traditional scholarly formats. The fellowship group includes playwright Velina Hasu Houston (School of Theatre), whose seminar project is a play, titled *Calligraphy*, that explores

intergenerational and cross-cultural intimacy, negotiation, and conflict between aging mothers and daughters. Intensely moving, artful, and provocative in its temporal and geographical shifts, the play stands as the creative culmination of a long process of more traditionally “academic” research that Houston performed prior to the composition and workshopping of the play. We were treated to two scene readings of the work in progress during the course of the year and were offered a glimpse into—and an opportunity to respond to—Houston's writerly work process. A full-length reading of the play will be part of our public session in May, which will also include screenings, demonstrations, and lectures devoted to the fellowship projects.

Aniko Imre (Critical Studies) is working in what is the most familiar scholarly format of the group; she has spent the year researching and writing on topics associated with questions about Transnational Feminism and the Mediated Public Sphere. To a large extent, however, Imre's research base is the least familiar, in that she is tracking an emergent phenomenon: identity-mediation within the “increasingly integrated and networked public sphere” of the New Europe. Her in-seminar presentation on Roma representation and self-



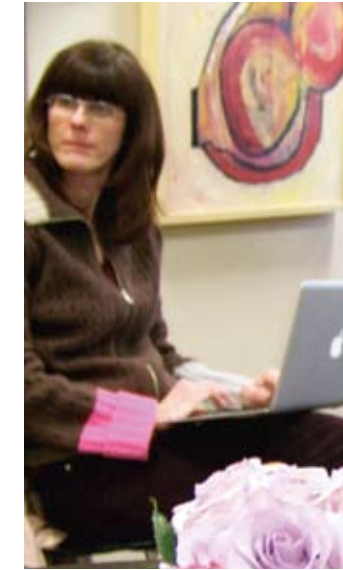
Alice Gambrell, English Department

representation (in film, digital media, television, and popular music) encompassed a rich interrogation and complex re-framing of conventional ways of understanding both the recent history of feminist scholarly analysis and of the “post-Cold War European media landscape.” Her public presentation in May will draw together many threads of her multifaceted new work.

Tara McPherson (Critical Studies) brought to the seminar a wealth of experience and insight gleaned from her ground-breaking editorship of the electronic journal *Vectors*, which launched in 2005. For the seminar she has been working on an extensive examination of reality-television-based makeover shows, in the context of a project titled *Recoding the Self: Transformation in the Era of Late Capitalism*. Alongside her analysis, McPherson is in the process of developing a video database of “makeover media” that

will ultimately be assembled within what McPherson describes as an “interpretive and analytical device that embeds an argument and a point of view.” Part of a larger work in progress that includes case studies ranging from mid-twentieth-century U.S.-based design practice to the development of computational programming languages, the *Recoding* project, alongside its pointed critique of contemporary rhetorics of “transformation,” also presents productively transformative possibilities for understanding the workings of race and gender within emerging (electronic) forms of scholarly expression.

D. Travers Scott, currently completing his dissertation at the Annenberg School, has in the course of the ND seminar been researching and writing about the phenomenon of “electro-sensitivity” and its relationship to questions about “health discourse, technological



Tara McPherson, School of Cinematic Arts

subjectivity, and the diseased feminine.” In addition to the more traditional, dissertation-based research, Scott is also creating an interactive video using the Korsakow System, which includes a set of tools that allow video clips to be remixed according to user selection as well as according to associative structures generated by the tool's tagging function. During the May event Scott, whose background as a journalist, novelist, performance artist, and scholar positions him as an expert in both the production and analysis of a range of media, will be screening his Korsakow project alongside a presentation of the electro-sensitives research.

Finally, in my own *New Directions* project I will take a look at artist Margaret Kilgallen (1967-2001), a graffiti writer, book restoration expert, and creator of painted assemblages that foregrounded the use of letterforms and words. Kilgallen's work provides a context for wide-ranging consideration of some of the seminar's key concerns with questions about language, mediation, identity-construction, and the relationship between older and newer expressive forms. In May I will be delivering a paper on Kilgallen and will also be showing an “electronic book” that I constructed using components from Leah Buechley's LilyPad Arduino system. Buechley, the director of MIT's High-Low Tech Workshop, created the LilyPad as a platform for the fabrication of wearable electronics, and I will be extending its use into book-making, another craft that centrally involves sewing.

The Time Has Come to Unthink

Notes on the ReThinking Sex Conference, Univ. of Pennsylvania

by Matt Carrillo-Vincent
Graduate Student, English

In 1984, Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," began with the full confidence of the sex-positive swagger: "The time has come," she demanded, "to think about sex." Rubin's command has, in its reception over the past twenty-five years, become a sort of mythic point of origin, signaling the inauguration of Sexuality Studies in the academy as we understand it today. But it is important to remember that, in the paper's original context at the historic 1982 Pleasure and Danger conference at Barnard College, the statement was a line-drawing polemic holding its ground in the trenches of the "Sex Wars" of the late 70's and early 80's. Twenty-five years later, in a time when academic conferences often don't resonate with the political urgency of Barnard or the kind of territorial inscriptions and invocations to which it spoke, a group of scholars from across the disciplinary spectrum gathered to revisit Rubin's piece, and, in a way, the Barnard conference itself.

"ReThinking Sex," a "State of the Field Conference in Gender and Sexuality Studies" meticulously organized by Heather Love (English, UPenn) this winter, featuring speakers such as José Muñoz, Jasbir Puar, Janet Jakobson, Judith Halberstam, and of course Gayle Rubin herself, was an opportunity to revisit the past, and Rubin's essay, from a very particular position in the present. But like most recreations of our romanticized pasts, the performance felt stilted, inadequate, and lacked the drama that only youth seems to be able to provide. Disciplinarity served as a marker of boundaries, but the conversation wasn't exactly the negotiation of political terrain that marked Rubin's original context. In other words, the conference fell flat, leveling off its political reach and aspirations at the hopes of intellectual labor, and the failures of the unfulfilled promises for which Rubin had reached.

But on the train ride to the airport at the end of closing session, I began to wonder if this wasn't the point. The most resonant and haunting questions of the conference—Where had black feminism been written out of this history? How did the figure of the anti-heroic queer create a new hero narrative? What if sex really can't do the work we've considered it able to accomplish?—were the ones that couldn't be thought through. And the most vibrant and promising papers—Lisa Duggan's plea for bitter hopelessness, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman's "sex without optimism," Judith Halberstam's masochistic call to "unthink sex"—were the ones that refused to participate. Faced with the limited options of radical antinormativity and the specter of neoliberalism, such papers wondered, "Are these the only choices?"

In our own young scholarship, trying to find its voice in the histories being written in the present, the context of such a question—"Are these the only choices?"—is both foreboding and comfortless; there is a way in which our conferences can no longer hold the weight of such future hopes. And yet the question itself, which foregoes the burden of the future with the ethics of the now, may be a liberatory one after all.

by Vanessa Shakib
Gender Studies Major

Over 100 grassroots lobbyists converged on Capitol Hill last Thursday with The Eating Disorders Coalition (EDC), pressuring their representatives to co-sponsor the Federal Response to Eliminating Eating Disorders (FREED) Act. Introduced by Representative Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) in the FREED Act is a comprehensive bill that provides federal action for research, treatment, and education/prevention of eating disorders. The EDC is an umbrella advocacy organization seeking to advance federal recognition of eating disorders as a public health priority.

While an estimated 9 million Americans suffer from bulimia nervosa, anorexia

nervosa, binge eating disorder, and eating disorders not otherwise specified (EDNOS), research remains drastically underfunded and the genetic predispositions to eating disorders remain largely unexplored. Over 50% of factors that make one vulnerable to eating disorders are hereditary. More to the point, two people may share the same environment, but only one with certain genetic susceptibilities will develop an eating disorder. It was once explained to me that eating disorders are relationship disorders—relationships with self and others. As Dr. Lisa Lilienfeld shared at the FREED Act congressional briefing, "put someone with an eating disorder on a desert island alone, that person will still have an eating disorder." Additionally, eating disorders impact males and females alike, with a previously understood ratio of 10:1 now approaching 3-4:1. Yet the stigma of eating disorders as passing phases or afflictions of the superficial and stupid cripple funding for research and awareness, keeping the problem in the closet and unaddressed—hiding the fact that eating disorders have the highest death rate of any psychiatric illness. Consequently, FREED includes provisions to determine the prevalence, incidence and correlates of eating disorders, as well as more accurate mortality rates.

While the bill itself is an exciting advance in promoting science over stigma, participants in the lobby day had their own telling stories to share. One recovered anorectic explained that, despite her doctor's warning that her parents should prepare for her death, her insurance would not cover hospitalization unless she lost more weight. Fortunately, her parents were able to use retirement saving and take money out of their home. Another recovering bulimic shared concerns that none of her in-network therapists had any specialization in eating disorders at all. While the Paul Wellstone Mental Health Parity made some progress, the bill still leaves open the opportunity for insurance companies to decide who gets money and how much. Under these conditions, insurance companies undermine the advice of doctors and implement their own ambiguous criteria in determining coverage.

While eating disorders may be expensive to treat, the economic burden is even greater when these illnesses go under-treated or ignored. The lack of access to modern, science-based treatment means that thousands of families are spending thousands—and sometimes hundreds of thousands—of dollars on care models that simply do not work. The research portion of the FREED Act includes an economic analysis to determine years of productive life lost, missed days of work, reduced work productivity, costs medical/psychiatric treatment, prescription medications, hospitalizations, costs of other comorbidities, and other costs to society and family.

Considering these factors, it is fitting that The FREED Act comes into play during political discourse favoring prevention as a healthier and more cost-efficient plan over treatment after-the-fact. This specifically involves better training for professionals dealing with children and adolescents, and reconsideration of the way that BMI is discussed, measured, and reported in schools. Various legislative assistants commented that certain provisions of the FREED Act could feasibly be incorporated into larger healthcare reform packages to come. With time, increased visibility, research and education can combat harmful stereotypes that create barriers to information, care, and the willingness of survivors to share their experiences. Having faced the difficulties of recovery myself and as a junior board member of the EDC, I was touched by the turnout of the event and the candid stories of the participants. However, I will admit that I was struck by the male to female representation. As the lobby day was dominated by women, I milled over two thoughts. First, how perceptions of eating disorders as (upper-class, white) female neurosis create a cultural climate wherein male sufferers are less likely to come out and advocate for themselves. And secondly, even if more women suffer, where are the fathers, brothers, husbands, boyfriends and male friends who know first-hand how scary and painful these diseases truly are?





news

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