

WOMEN'S

DUKE

STUDIES

Spring 2011 Newsletter

Director's Note

by Ranjana Khanna, Margaret Taylor Smith Director of Women's Studies

This semester, my Friday mornings have been spent with Ada Gregory, Director of the Women's Center, and a group of others who are considering the gendered nature of undergraduate culture at Duke today, seven years after the Women's Initiative organized by President Nan Keohane. It's been an interesting taskforce so far, and calls for an assessment of achievements but it is also an attempt to consider blind spots of the former report. In one of our first meetings, we discussed an article from *The Atlantic Monthly*, which unfortunately once again characterized Duke in particular as a hazardous place for women. I wouldn't say for a moment that all things are fine for women at Duke, but the attack demonstrates a kind of sanctimonious vitriol that would be best used to criticize certain ideals of society more generally and hardly represents everything about Duke's culture alone. Duke University becomes the origin and the epitome of everything

negative, and the author demonstrates the same contempt for its high quality academic culture as it does for sexual violence. In her analysis, all talk of sex appears negative, and completely ignores the huge amount of scholarship on the politics of sexuality more broadly — what's at stake in its private and public face, its tragedies and disappointments, as well as its pleasures and humours. These are the discussions that we have with our students weekly in our courses on gender and sexuality.

Duke University's desire to be academically excellent is seen as a boorish hunger for star faculty. If that is unique to Duke, then I'll eat my mortarboard. Fortunately, in the case of Duke, it comes with a rich intellectual environment. A more measured response to the problems on campuses in this country is to make the scholarship on these issues a part of every student's training.

Finally, the twelve stories you will read from this year's class of Women's Studies majors may do the best job of countering the negative descriptions of the campus environment for our students. I hope you share *their* stories the next time you have a conversation about the culture here at Duke.

OUR GRADUATING SENIORS

Meet our smiling seniors (and their professor) photographed in the East Duke Parlors:

Top left to right: Trent Serwetz, Ji-Hyeun Kwon, Jack Grote, Allyson Helmers, Professor Kathi Weeks, Celeste Brown

Middle left to right: Aliza Lopes-Baker, Julia Finch, Kelsey Porter, Tangere Hoagland

Bottom left to right: Song Kim, Gabrielle Hope, Baye Cobb



Spring Events

- 1/14** **Working Group in Feminism and History (WGFH), Sexuality, Race, and Reproductive Medicine**, Nora Doyle (UNC) Jennifer Kosmin (UNC) and Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell (Duke) *Sponsored by the Carolina Seminars*
- 1/27** **In-Print: A Celebration of Recent Gender-Related Publications by Duke Faculty** Frances Hasso, Carlos Rojas, Charles Piot, Pervin Banu Gokarikel (UNC), Kristine Stiles, Karla FC Holloway, Anna Krylova, Martha Reeves, R. Larry Todd
- 2/3** **Carrie Mae Weems, In Conversation** with Richard Powell, John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art, Art History & Visual Studies and Kimberly Lamm, Women's Studies
- 2/7** **Working Group in Feminism and History (WGFH), Perspectives on the Practice of Feminist History**, Michelle King (UNC), Nancy MacLean (Duke), Jocelyn Olcott (Duke), Robyn Wiegman (Duke) *Sponsored by the Carolina Seminars*
- 2/10** **Kris Weller** Postdoctoral Fellow Women's Studies "Mind the Gap: Species, Sanity, and Legal Subjecthood" *Animals and the Question of Species*
- 2/21** **Temple Grandin** Doctor of Animal Science and Professor Colorado State University "My Experience with Animals" *Animals and the Question of Species*
- 3/3** **Dorothy Q. Thomas** University of London "Daughters of the American Revolution: Progressivism, Feminism and Human Rights in the United States" *Sponsored by the Duke Human Rights Center, The Trent Foundation, Archive for Human Rights, Franklin Humanities Institute, and the program in the study of sexualities*
- 3/17** **New Voices in Animal Studies** with Donna Haraway, UC-Santa Cruz; Neel Ahuja, UNC-CH; Adeline Rother, Cornell; Colter Ellis, UColorado-Boulder; Astrid Schrader, Sarah Lawrence; Lisa Uddin, Rochester *Animals and the Question of Species*
- 3/18-3/19** **Feminist Theory Workshop** featuring Annamarie Jagose (University of Sydney, Australia), Donna Haraway (UC-Santa Cruz), Rosalind Morris (Columbia University), Pheng Cheah (UC-Berkeley)
- 3/25** **Anne Firor Scott Lecture** by Suzanne Lebsock, Board of Governors Professor of History, Rutgers University, "Farming for Freedom: College Women's Interracialism in World War II," *Co-sponsored by the Department of History*
- 4/15-4/16** **Chinese Cinemas: Rethinking the Field** with Carlos Rojas *Co-sponsored with Asian/Pacific Studies Institute and Asian Middle Eastern Studies*

Please check our website for upcoming events and to hear Temple Grandin's talk and the keynotes at FTW



On February 3, the Department of Art, Art History & Visual Studies and the Program in Women's Studies co-hosted an event, **Carrie Mae Weems, In Conversation** with **Richard Powell**, John Spencer Bassett Professor of AAHSV and **Kimberly Lamm**, Assistant Professor Women's Studies. Carrie Mae Weems is one of the most prominent contemporary visual artists at work today. Her photographs, installations, and videos have been exhibited in over 50 exhibitions in the United States and abroad. Drawing upon the traditions of Civil Rights photography, African American folklore, and black feminism, Weems composes narratives that engage with the visual consequences of power. Through a wide range of mediums and forms of address, Weems creatively refracts the lived dimensions of racial and gendered imaginaries. Her work has been crucial for investigating how contemporary art can attend to the legacies and longings inspired by the African diaspora and consistently resonates across multiple communities and academic disciplines. Weems' popularity was evidenced by the packed crowd of well over 100 who came to see and hear her address questions from Lamm and Powell about her straightforward, complex, and compelling work.

Carrie Mae WEEMS

In Conversation

With Richard J. Powell, John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art, Art History and Visual Studies, and Kimberly K. Lamm, Assistant Professor of Women's Studies

February 3, 2011
3:00 - 4:30 PM

East Duke 209
Duke University

Carrie Mae Weems is an award-winning photographer and visual artist. Her photographs, films, and videos have been displayed in over fifty exhibitions in the United States and abroad and focus on racism, sexism, gender relations, politics, and personal identity. Weems' work is included in both public and private collections worldwide, including the Art Institute of Chicago; the Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.

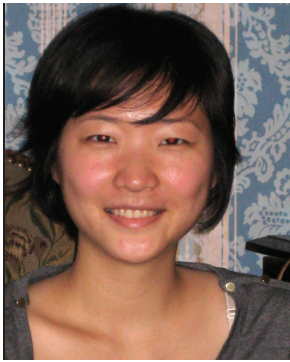
In conjunction with Carrie Mae Weems' visit, her 4 minute, 10 second video projection, *Slip Girl* (from Afro Chic, 2009-10) will screen in the East Duke Building Corridor Gallery from January 26 - February 4, 2011 (courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York).

Co-sponsored by the Department of Art, Art History & Visual Studies and the Program in Women's Studies. Weems' visit is also supported by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Weems' work is part of *The Record: Contemporary Art and Vinyl*, on view through February 6 at the Nasher Museum.

ART HISTORY & VISUAL STUDIES
DUKE UNIVERSITY

WOMEN'S STUDIES

Senior Stories



Ji-Hyeun Kwon

I came to Duke knowing that I was going to major in Women's Studies. My decision did not surprise my parents, my siblings or my friends because **I had always been outspoken about women's rights** in South Korea, in the United States, at home, at school and at social gatherings. **My family performed a religious ritual called jaesah three to four times every year to pay respect to our ancestors' spirits, and my gender prevented me from performing the ritual before my now-old-enough male cousin.** It only took one sentence from my dad's mouth for my feminist fire to start when I was in third grade: "Your younger male cousin goes first because he is the first son of the Kwon family." I did not know what feminism was back then, but it was clear to me that what my dad said was unjust. I told my mom about what my dad said, and ever since that not-so-ordinary day, I could again perform the ritual first and I have been part of the feminist community.

Before taking Women's Studies classes at Duke, I refused to perform "feminine" roles, such as cooking and cleaning, because I did not want to be the stereotypical woman who cooks and cleans for men. My mom tried to convince me that some "feminine" tasks were necessary life skills, but I thought it was one of my mom's devious attempts to turn me into perfect wife material. Women's Studies changed my view, however. **I learned that I was reinforcing gender inequality by praising "masculine" characteristics while denigrating "feminine" characteristics** — I was as myopic as the people that I considered sexist! I still remember the day when I was surprised to find out about various types of feminism and negative connotations attached to feminism. **Women's Studies broadened my vision and built a theoretical foundation for my reproachful stance against gender inequality.** Now, I still do not enjoy cooking (just not my cup of tea), but I do not mind cooking for my family and friends once in a while.

A few months ago, I told my mom that I did not watch a Korean show called *We Got Married* because it was full of sexist comments. In response to my comment, my mom asked me, "Why do you live such an exhausting life?" because I constantly analyzed and criticized gender schemas. I wish I could watch movies and TV shows without pointing out every single gender schema, but it is too late because I took **Gender and Everyday Life** with Professor Rudy and watched a presentation on masculinity. I wish I could simply call sex work "immoral" just like many other people, but it is too late because I took **Sex Work: Economics of Gender & Desire** with Kinohi Nishikawa and studied the sex industry from a secular perspective.

Whether I work for the federal government or for a policy institute in the future, I will always be cognizant of gender dynamics, and instead of simply getting angry at people who make sexist comments, I will start a conversation by asking, "Why do you think...?" as **Dr Jean O'Barr** advised. Even though my mom hopes that I live a "normal" life, **I cannot cover my eyes in front of injustice because I am the first child of Kil-Wha Kwon, who once called me "the pillar of our family" even with my younger brother's existence, and Seung-Bok Min, who refused to clean her male colleagues' desks in the 1980s in Korea. My feminist fight will continue.**

Our Postdocs

"MIND THE GAP: SPECIES, SANITY, AND LEGAL SUBJECTHOOD"

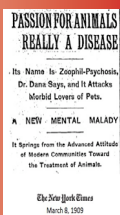
Kris Weller

Thursday, February 10th
East Duke Parlors, 4 pm
Reception to follow

Why were zoo animals and mental patients brought together in a decision by the New York Court of Appeals? Why do we believe Temple Grandin when she says she thinks like a cow? Could psychiatric service animals point the way to a kinder, gentler, legal person?

Kris Weller, Postdoc in Women's Studies, (PhD History of Consciousness, UC-Santa Cruz) will consider these questions as she addresses what's at stake—conceptually and politically—in maintaining the human-animal divide.

WOMEN'S DUKE STUDIES

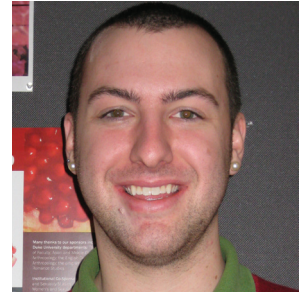


In April, **Eva Hayward**, Postdoctoral Fellow in Women's Studies and Assistant Professor, Department of Cinematic Arts, Interdisciplinary Film and Digital Media Program at the University of New Mexico will present

In February, **Kris Weller**, Postdoctoral Fellow in Women's Studies gave a talk, **"Mind the Gap: Species, Sanity, and Legal Subjecthood"** which considered what's at stake — conceptually and politically — in maintaining the human-animal divide. Kris has been offered a 2011-12 Postdoctoral position at the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Penn State University.

her work-in-progress, **"How Like a Reef: Leni Riefenstahl and Wonders Underwater."** This paper asks how Riefenstahl represents race, sex, and species as surface for the purposes of fetishizing the visual as the source of difference and analyzes **a crisis in visualizing species difference** in her underwater photographic and cinematic works.

Jack Grote



When I first came to Duke, I was Pre-Med (of course). During my first year I took far too many math and science classes. But in my spring semester, I decided to take SXL 120S **Clinical Issues in LGBT** with **Dr. Janie Long** as my freshman seminar. I had become very involved in the LGBTQ community at Duke and began working for The Center for LGBT Life. I figured that the next logical step would be to enroll in a sexuality class. I believed that as a gay male it would be interesting to study sexuality academically. Shortly after taking the class I decided that I would get a certificate in the Study of Sexualities and that I was going to be a Biological Anthropology and Anatomy major. My sophomore year, I was taking WST 150S **Cultures of Gender and Sexuality** with **Elizabeth Engebretsen** to help fulfill my Sexuality Studies requirement. It was the first class I'd taken that spent a significant amount of time focusing on gender. As a liberal-leaning, social activist, **I had always been a self-proclaimed feminist, but didn't know what that meant in an academic sense.** After finishing reading *Travesti*, Don Kulick's ethnography of Brazilian transgendered prostitutes, I became fascinated in the ways in which gender and sexuality were intertwined. Luckily, after that class I decided that being a doctor was not the right career path for me and declared as a Women's Studies major, allowing me to take many more classes dealing with intersectionality.

Celeste Brown



If a fortuneteller predicted that throughout my college years I was going to become a vegetarian, question whether humans are different from apes, discover Nicki Minaj to be an empowering woman, or identify as a feminist, I would have asked the fortuneteller for my money back...especially after the last statement. Just as the boys in the movie *The Little Rascals* started a He-Man Woman Haters Club, I had the notion that feminists were all members of some unofficial She-Woman Man Haters Club. For this reason, I shied away from identifying as a feminist. However, the moment I walked into my first Women's Studies class, I began my "feminist" identification and it still continues.

When I entered Duke as a first-year student, I had a life plan. I was going to major in psychology, eventually go to graduate school, and become a psychologist. Among my first-year courses was **Gender and Everyday Life**. This class was one of many that started me rethinking what I wanted to gain from life and my plans for the future. Most classes consisted of copying down facts and then memorizing them for an exam, but my Women's Studies class was never like that. In fact, most of the time we never came to a definite conclusion! The class was spent discovering how to think in a completely different way.

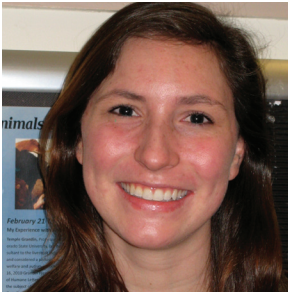
I started to question my identity. What does it mean to be a woman in society? More specifically, what does it mean to be a woman on Duke's campus? What issues are of upmost importance to me?

As a girl who once attended a Christian school, I was very interested in **Religion and the Moral Status of Animals** taught by Professor Kathy Rudy. We discussed the role religion plays in how we treat other living things on the earth and since this class, my primary interest concerns the relationships between feminism and animal rights. What can we learn about our gender and sexuality from animals? How can we learn from them without speaking the same language? Do I have a responsibility towards other forms of life?

For me, feminism is not only about equal rights for women and men, but is about finding my place in this world amongst all living things. (At least, today this is what feminism means to me). As I learn more, my mind is constantly growing and changing. Out of all of the classes I have taken in my four years at Duke, my Women's Studies classes have challenged me to think critically and analyze social norms the most. **When I tell people my major, I sometimes get the sneered reaction, "What can you do with a Women's Studies degree?" My reply is always the same. "Anything."** I can go into law, I can teach, or I can even form a She-Woman Inequalities Hater Club. However, my club may have to wait awhile. Next year, I will teach in an elementary school through Teach for America. In Women's Studies I learned what it means to be a woman in this world — that I have a responsibility toward myself and others; and as I continue to redefine my feminism and consequently, myself — that is what will help me succeed in the classroom and beyond.

Through the Women's Studies program, I have been able to study all of my interests in a variety of fields. Women's Studies courses are so much more than just feminist theory. Nearly every single class I have taken has been cross-listed in multiple other departments. For this reason, **despite only having one major, I am leaving Duke with such a broad education — having taken classes in psychology, history, cultural anthropology, literature, theater studies and many more. Few other fields allow for such diverse modes of study.**

Next year I plan on entering law school. I am completely confident in my ability to succeed in that field largely due to my Women's Studies background. In every class I have taken, my writing skills have been tested and challenged and I now know that I can effectively make a complex argument. Beyond my career aspirations, my Women's Studies major has prepared me for all facets of life. At Duke, my education gave me the language to speak against discrimination. **Unfortunately, we live in a world in which acts of hate are constantly being committed. Women's Studies has provided me with the strength and desire to speak out against these acts.** I plan on continuing the social activism that I began in college, to be informed about all forms of oppression, and to look critically at all constructs of normativity in my life.



Julia Finch

I came to Duke, like so many others, intent on being a Biology major headed for medical school. **As a first-year sitting in my 8:30 am Calculus class, I never would have imagined that I would soon trade Organic Chemistry for Sex Work — the class.** It was in Kinohi Nishikawa's **Sex Work: Economies of Gender and Desire** that I was truly challenged for the first time at Duke; I was required not only to learn new information, but to think in an entirely new way. Additionally, I had to learn to ignore the looks I got from others while e-printing articles that could easily be confused for porn. I had always gravitated toward Math and Science as a younger student because I felt com-

fortable with the idea of correct answers and facts that can be proven. One thing that I learned very quickly in Kinohi's class is that there is no single "right" answer, and while that thought should have scared me, it did the opposite. While debating the merits of decriminalizing prostitution, I realized that the passion I felt was for neither side, but instead for the overwhelming complexity of the issue. Women's Studies taught me not only to seek out different perspectives and critically assess everything, but also to be satisfied without coming to an entirely conclusive result. **By the fall of this year, I had learned to accept confusion and embrace paradox.**

Soon after discovering Women's Studies, what I learned in class began to seep into other aspects of my life. I became unable to be in academic or social situations without constantly assessing the power dynamics acting around me. Using the vocabulary I learned in Women's Studies classes, I was able to identify what were previously just feelings of something simply not being right in the world and, especially, at Duke. **Being able to put names to concepts such as sexism, wage equity, and consent made me eager to act in some way to improve the lives of women.** Through this work, I ultimately got involved with the Women's Center, where I have been an intern for two years. The outreach and activism that I do there is a perfect complement for the history and theory that I learn in my Women's Studies classes. In order to be a successful activist, I have learned to draw on the successes and challenges of past movements as well as critically assess my actions from a variety of theoretical perspectives.

My education in Women's Studies has been indispensable to my work as an activist on campus and the work that I hope to do in the future. While my next few years are still rather uncertain, I know that I want to travel and continue to learn about the diverse experiences of women around the globe. I plan to use the knowledge and the feminist framework that I have developed throughout my Women's Studies classes to synthesize and analyze what I learn in order **to develop concrete solutions to tackle the oppression of and violence against women in the US and abroad.**



Trent Serwetz

Women's Studies represents an enormous turning point in my life. Its significance requires some backtracking to explain.

When I applied to Duke in 2007 I was, first and foremost, a debater. From a young age, I had been informally debating with people, my parents included, and was accustomed to hearing adults declare "Oh, you're going to

be a lawyer." With four years of "value debate" in high school under my belt, I entered college with this goal in mind and signed up for training in philosophy and ethics. But I quickly discovered that philosophy frustrated me as much as it interested me. **I was learning the fine critical nuances of history's great philosophers, but the humanist premises implicit in their works went obliquely unchallenged.** I wanted to quarrel with Kant, to question why the rational human was the starting point of his metaphysics. I wanted to indict the premises of my disciplinary lessons even as I was learning them.

Confident in my pre-law aspirations but floundering academically, I changed majors to Women's Studies following the fall of my junior year after earning what amounts to a philosophy minor. In the introductory seminar taught by Professor Ranji Khanna, I was immersed in a form of learning which questioned its own assumptions as strongly as it questioned the ideologies opposing it. I was captivated by the rich archive of intra-feminist debates: this was a whole new kind of learning. Far from discouraging curmudgeonly behavior, **Women's Studies professors invited students to prod their teaching and to question its implicit premises. From philosophy and critical theory to anthropology and psychology, every disciplinary apparatus was viewed as welcome opposition. Throughout my time in the Women's Studies program, I have been consistently pushed not only to deepen my understanding of feminist and queer works but to broaden my academic horizons.** Each course has provided a different opportunity to synthesize and connect earlier conversations, building a rich intellectual résumé.

For me, the major has delivered everything it promised to from the outset. The intro imposed a certain lack of normativity on classroom discussion and since then my studies have covered all manner of the so-called gross and obscene. This year I'm working on an honors thesis with Professor Robyn Wiegman called "The Politics of Sexxx," a theoretical project exploring the complex intersections of sex and politics. Sexxx is spelled with three x's in the title in order to navigate the slippage between "sex" as intercourse and "sex" as sexual difference (and to clarify my project's focus on the former). But the major has also provided an especially personal education. My Women's Studies professors, especially Robyn, have engaged with me as a multidimensional human being and never as an anonymous student. I am deeply grateful.

So, I entered Duke anticipating a career in criminal defense, and I will leave it anxious to begin a career in Family Law. **Women's Studies completely transformed my academic and extracurricular life, and while it was not always easy being a man in a woman's world, I could not be happier for my education.** Clients who have experienced domestic violence or sexual assault require not just legal but also practical, emotional, and even spiritual guidance. A good Family Law attorney must see beyond the legal issues at work and understand the complex experiences of his/her clients in order to be effective. I think I'm leaving with the right major.



Allyson Helmers

I only tell people I am a Women's Studies major. I let them assume I am a femi-

nist, a leftist, possibly a lesbian. I shrug my shoulders coyly when they point out the irony of my theoretical babblings on reproductive rights while sifting through a rack of designer jeans at Nordstrom. I study women, but I do not study only women. **I study men, children, and animals. I study interactions, institutions, and social practices. Of course, I'm a feminist!** Sure, I'm a leftist. If you want to hear my thoughts on sexuality, we should



...the Duke Journal of Gender and Sexuality is a radically interdisciplinary space for celebrating the best student work in the study of gender and sexuality across the humanities, social sciences, and biological sciences at Duke.

Volume I, Issue I Spring 2011
the Duke Journal of Gender and Sexuality

Unzipped was founded in Fall 2010 (by Trent, Ji and Ally among others!) and published its inaugural issue March 2011. The publication is sponsored and advised by the Program in Women's Studies and co-sponsored by the Women's Center, Center for LGBT Life, and program in the study of sexualities.

probably settle in for a cup of coffee. **I'm not that easily categorized; and neither is the Women's Studies Program at Duke.**

My journey in the Women's Studies Program began first in the familiar discipline of History, my declared major and field of preference. My knowledge of so-called "women's studies" was limited to what I had read about civil rights movements in a few high-school edition history textbooks, as well as a burgeoning fascination with Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf that seemed to worry my mother. So for my first class in the department, I chose **Gender, Sexuality, and Politics in the Modern West**, a title that seemed broad enough to cover the basics. I never thought it would ignite a flurry of interest in historical narratives of birth control reform at parties or compel me to tunnel below the Chick-Fil-A to check out the LGBT Center. I suddenly had new material for conversations that I couldn't wait to discuss, and my friends, mostly Philosophy and Literature majors, happily obliged.

My fascination with the program peaked when **I recognized that I wasn't, in fact, majoring in feminism. I had studied philosophy, economics, and cultural anthropology. For the first time since I got to college, I felt like I wanted more. I find the phrase "women's studies" to be problematic, far too limiting to cover the content that falls under its interdisciplinary purview.** Should we perhaps call it "gender studies"? Judith Butler may say so. But then what of Robyn Wiegman's course **Queer Theory**, which seems not to fit within either of these demarcations? What of my specific interest in queer jurisprudence? In my senior honor's thesis, I dedicate much attention to women, but also to sexuality in general, to patriarchy, and to the contemporary legal system. Yet, if all goes according to plan, I will graduate with honors in a program without any of these terms in its title. So **I invite those who insist on pigeonholing my interests and identity to discuss the mystical "women's studies" of which I speak.** Although I cannot simplify anyone's experience in the program, I can say with confidence that we have all become some very apt conversationalists.



Kelsey Porter

From the very first time I was old enough to understand what a career was, I have always considered myself to be a scientist. I went from an elementary school student more interested in microscopes than toys, to a middle-schooler more excited about biology than boys, to a high-school student more eager to discuss my Anatomy and Physiology assignments than the football game the night before. I was unwaveringly sure that I was destined to be a scientist and a doctor. I came into college knowing that it was to be a time of personal change and self-discovery, but the scientific foundation of my identity was rock solid in my mind. All of this drastically changed

from my very first day in **Gender and Popular Culture**, a class I took as a sophomore on a whim while I was already in the process of declaring a biology major. For the first time I found myself totally immersed in a way of thinking that challenged everything I knew about the way I viewed myself and the world. It was a fascinating and terrifying experience, but I knew that I was hooked. **However, completely altering my life-long plan for my education was one of the most difficult decisions I've had to make as a young adult.** After many tearful phone calls home and with the incredible support of my advisor **Tina Campt**, I finally decided to dive in, and I never looked back.

Majoring in Women's Studies has been one of the most valuable experiences in my young life, and the lessons I have learned from my professors and classmates have profoundly informed the person I have become through my four years at Duke. **Alongside my "traditionally" rigorous pre-med curriculum, Women's Studies has been a refuge for me — academically and personally. The lab and the hospital were my comfort zones, but my Women's Studies classes were the places where I flexed my intellectual muscles and pushed the boundaries of my thinking.** I was able to study topics ranging from sex workers to black British identity formation, and it was an invigorating experience to find myself learning lessons without concrete answers — answers to which I was allowed and encouraged to contribute. **It was difficult at first to reconcile the double life I was living — scientist by day, moonlighting as a feminist theorist.** Then, Kimberle Crenshaw lent me a helping hand with her theory of "intersectionality," the idea that "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately." **I have realized that I do not have to be any one thing in isolation — I am an intersection of woman and black/scientist and feminist/student and teacher. Learning to live these identities at their intersection is the greatest lesson I have learned from my Women's Studies experience —** one that has helped me gain a deeper understanding of myself and given me a new approach to understanding the patients I will treat in the future.



Baye Cobb

I'll start by telling you a little bit about myself, the abbreviated version, if you will. I'm actually not a senior. I'm a junior and I'm graduating early — an idea completely alien to most of my peers. Why would I want to leave this fine institution any earlier than I have to? Well, quite simply, I'm ready; and to a large extent, I have my Women's Studies degree to thank for that. To better explain, I'll start at the beginning.

I came to Duke not knowing much about what I wanted to study and even less about myself or my place in the world, and I was happy that way. After a turbulent first three weeks I found myself scrambling to find a class to fill a gap in my schedule.

The next day I was enrolled in **Women As Leaders** taught by **Rachel Seidman**.^{*} Though I vehemently rejected the title "feminist", the class sounded interesting. Just a few weeks later, a door had opened into my heart and mind and I had transformed into a very angry self-proclaimed feminist. **Suddenly I found myself publicly challenging anyone who refused to actively identify as a feminist; I found myself wanting to yell things like: "Men and women aren't equal yet! We live in a patriarchy! Women are only paid 78 cents to the male dollar! Employment discrimination still exists!"** Newly aware of so much injustice and sexism, I was miserably unhappy.

Eventually I stopped wanting to yell and rather sought refuge in more feminist-friendly spaces. Naturally, I found myself in more Women's Studies classrooms and in an internship with the Duke Women's Center. The next logical decision was to declare my Women's Studies major, immersing myself daily in engaging, relevant, and often challenging conversations. I found peers and mentors who shared my feminist sentiments. Intellectually, my courses allow me to reflect not only on my own experiences, but on a history of suffragettes, mothers, and working women — the women who have and will continue to shape my past, present and future.

What makes Women's Studies different is not only the day-to-day relevance of my coursework, but also the constant guidance and mentorship I have found there. Never have I experienced such care and concern from professors and mentors as I have in the Women's Studies Program and the Women's Center. Their support has helped me reconcile past experiences with longstanding personal beliefs, aiding me in what have been some of the hardest decisions of my life.

I feel extremely fortunate to have found Women's Studies. How many people have the chance to spend four years studying something so perfectly relevant to every aspect of their lives? Having recently applied to the Peace Corps, I plan to use my Women's Studies major when I graduate early in December 2011. Ideally, my majors (WST and Public Policy) will help me utilize feminist leadership models in establishing gender-conscious water policies in developing countries.

My experience here has been permanently and positively impacted by my coursework, and I'm looking forward to the ways in which I will carry these studies with me beyond the Duke community. With this foundation in Women's Studies, I'm ready and happy to start the next stage of my life after Duke.

^{}This reflection could easily have become both an in-depth thank-you note and a letter of admiration to Professor Seidman and to the staff in the Women's Center. Their guidance has truly impacted my college trajectory more so than I could ever explain.*

Gabrielle Hope



To tell the truth, becoming a Women's Studies major was an accident. **When I arrived at Duke I had no idea what Women's Studies was**, but that spring I enrolled in **Money, Sex, Power** taught by Professor **Ara Wilson**, because I thought "How can this not be interesting? It's about money and sex and power!" **While I was hoping to talk about women using their feminine wiles to gain power and influence in the work force, what we actually discussed were economic models, feminist economics, and the globalization of women's labor.** At year-end Professor Wilson suggested I consider majoring in Women's Studies. I promptly dismissed the notion. There was no way I was going to have everyone believe I was some kind of raging-angry-feminist-man-hater. The following semester I saw a cultural anthropology course **Sex and Money**, and this time I thought, "Well maybe this is the course I thought **Money, Sex, Power** was going to be." Economics is by no means my forte, and as such, a lot of the theory simply went over my head. But when we began discussing the other side of these issues in **Sex and Money**, the theories began to make sense, the concepts started to tumble into place, and I really began to understand how truly significant the work done in the name of feminism has been, and how much still needs to be done. I came to understand feminism as a movement that aims to achieve greater



Aliza Lopes-Baker

Approximately 946 days ago, as I registered for my first Women's Studies course at Duke University, I expected the class to be an interesting interlude to my pre-med heavy course-load. **I was planning on majoring in Biology**, shuffling amongst the thousands of other pre-med students trying to survive weed-out classes and nightmare-inducing chemistry exams. Approximately halfway through my time in **Gender and Everyday Life**, the introductory course in Women's Studies, I found myself contemplating a double major in Biology and Women's Studies. **A year later, after having taken three more courses in the Women's Studies program, I found myself declaring a Women's Studies major with a minor in Biology.**

This course of events was not one that I could have predicted, or one that I would have imagined for myself three years ago as a fresh-faced (and slightly naïve) first-year student. That first Women's Studies class started me on a journey that I have yet to complete, one which continues to surprise me, but nonetheless one which I have never regretted. **Were it not for my Women's Studies courses, I can definitively assert that I would never have flourished to the extent that I have within Duke's thriving activist community.** From my work as the co-director of the Center for Race Relations Common Ground Retreat, to my advocacy on the Executive Board of Duke's LGBTQ undergraduate student group Blue Devils United (BDU), and even within my position as a Resident Assistant for Kilgo Quad, my impact in each of these arenas would have been extremely limited, and in some cases non-existent, were it not for my experiences within Women's Studies. **These incredible WST professors instilled in me a sense of power and agency, as both a student and a woman**, a feeling I have yet to experience in any other department. Were it not for Women's Studies, I cannot imagine that I would have been open to pursuing the expansive and varied opportunities that have made my time at Duke a truly unforgettable experience.

As I look back over my Duke career, and particularly my time spent within Women's Studies, I am struck by the way in which the courses I have taken have informed both my current and future endeavors. **My feminist education has informed my ideas related to the intersectionalities of all types of oppression, and consequently directly informed my experiences within groups such as the Center for Race Relations, addressing all forms of identity on Duke's campus and creating a campus open to dialogue amongst diverse communities. It is mind-blowing to know that my activism on campus, and the change that I have seen grow from this activism might never have come to fruition without the foundation in collective oppression and productive activism that my courses in Women's Studies afforded me.**

I have so much to be thankful for with regards to the opportunities that Duke has offered me — having the chance to study with some of the most incredible feminist role models a woman could hope for. As I set off to the world outside the boundaries of this campus, I am comforted by the knowledge that everything I have learned through my time in the Women's Studies program will serve me extremely well as I continue to work for causes at the intersection of social justice movements within the United States.

equality – not only for women, but for all groups that are marginalized by structures that are almost so intrinsically established in our societies that we can barely see them. And that making advancements towards equality for one group, the way is being paved for many others. Somewhere, in the middle of discussing Japanese hostess clubs and Brazilian transgendered prostitutes, I declared myself a Women's Studies major.

I never anticipated that Women's Studies would transform my outlook on the world as dramatically as it has. It's taught me to challenge my environment, to never accept that the way things are, are the way that they ought to be. I've learned that things most people accept to be as fixed or inherent aspects of society and human nature are in fact not set in stone; that societal norms are malleable — but often require a lot of work before they can be moved. When I see the accomplishments and triumphs of other women I feel a sense of pride so great that it sometimes startles me.

I'm proud to be a part of Women's Studies, to be a feminist (which turns out to be nothing like the aforementioned raging-angry-feminist-man-hater) and to be a woman. **While I don't know where I'll be twenty, or ten, or even five years from now, I do know that I will continue to be aware of the adversities that I (and many other marginalized peoples) will face and overcome and to question and challenge the status quo.** I want to help others to realize that they can shape their own gender identity (because masculinity and femininity are unfixed) and we can all place ourselves wherever on this spectrum we so desire, and doing so will influence and shape the world in which we live.

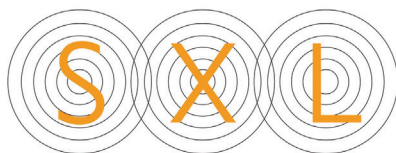


Tangere Hoagland

I came to college to find a husband because my parents instilled in me that I needed a man to care and provide for me. I believed that the dream of every woman was to be married and I dreamed of being a housewife — I thought my sole existence and purpose centered around a man. But when I entered Professor Kathy Rudy's class, *Gender and Everyday Life*, my entire perspective on life changed. In this class I was challenged to question my life goals, by fleshing out values that my family instilled based on my gender. I learned that my aspirations were not my own, but were my mother's and father's who chose to live vicariously through me. From the day that I dressed and carried myself as a man in Professor Rudy's class, I knew that Women's Studies would forever be a part

of my life. This interest manifested in my professor's ability to flip every notion of gender on its head. My only quarrels came from those not understanding why I would pay thousands of dollars for a Duke education and major in something unheard of, something that I would have to explain and defend every time I mentioned it. I was supposed to become a plastic surgeon. The question posed by loved ones is "What can be done with a major in Women's Studies?" Their concerns are legitimate; they are concerned with my future success, which is based on money. However, Professor Rudy challenged me to define success, not in terms of money, but happiness.

Women's Studies is an analytical field, which causes me to question and debate about topics that many would accept as the "norm." In this field there is no such thing as the "norm" and I suppose those closest to me find me a nuisance for my failure to submit to dominant discourse. For instance, I was shocked to learn there were more than two sexes, but society has said that we can only exist with two. Professor Tina Campt, in *Interpreting Bodies*, made the entire class wonder if they had been born the opposite gender or a hermaphrodite. Knowing this information, I now stop people when they try to make an argument and use the fact that there are two sexes as evidence in some way. I have attempted to make many strong arguments in this field. My most memorable argument was the paper I wrote for Professor Caroline Light, in *Sex and the Global Citizen*. I was comparing female genital mutilation in Sudan to male circumcision in the United States. The only difference between the two, in my opinion, was access to medical technology in the United States. All of my research has led me to believe there is much that can be done with a background in Women's Studies. What touched me the most is the research that I have done with gender-based violence. It has helped me to relate this field to my personal life and has bestowed hope, passion, and motivation. I want to go to graduate school and receive a PhD in Women's Studies. In the end, I pray that my research leads me to work with women on a global scale through the United Nations.



the program in the study of sexualities at duke

by Ara Wilson, Director of the program in the study of sexualities

As is true of all academic units, the program in the study of sexualities underwent university review in 2009-2010. The first was a review of the undergraduate certificate, conducted by the Arts & Science Curriculum Committee which said, "The general consensus by the committee was that this is a unique and important program that has grown in popularity since its inception. It is well-conceived, in terms of linking to Duke's strategic focus and mission, and leveraging the interests of faculty expertise from other departments and programs." The second internal review was commissioned by the Dean of Social Sciences and included members from Humanities and Social Sciences at Duke and UNC. This committee evaluated the place of the program in the study of sexualities in the broader university. "SXL has been a vital and thriving program at Duke," the Dean's report noted, adding that "the program has tremendous potential to grow and expand, becoming a more integral and influential part of the intellectual life of the university." This Internal Review recommended that the university increase funding for the program, to at least double its current budget.

Both reviews offered the following suggestions, which the SXL program is taking steps to address.



Song Kim

During the stressful crunch of finals each semester, my friends would jokingly comment on how much “fun” it must be to research “weird people having sex. You are ALWAYS writing about SEX!” I couldn’t deny their observation, but boy, little did they know of the arduous mental labor required by Women’s Studies. As if toiling over Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and Butler for hours on end wasn’t enough, I was to carefully synthesize their incomprehensible theories in order to study real people. I wrote and rewrote my sentences; no wording seemed sufficiently clear or precise to describe the complex identity-formation these “weird” people did with their bodies. To extract a coherent schema underlying the narratives, I had to discard certain parts of their lives that didn’t

quite fit. At the end of the rigorous writing process, however, I felt that I had gained valuable acquaintance with my subjects: transgender voguers of Harlem; Japanese schoolgirls who write love letters to each other; and most memorably, Filipina club women in U.S. camptowns of Korea whom I had the fortune of meeting and befriending in real life.

I cannot fully explain my attraction to Women’s Studies without highlighting the scholarly task of deconstructing and rehashing... pretty much everything. From the very outset of introductory WST90, we learn that gender, race, and sexuality may be arbitrary social categories that claim their “nature” on physical bodies. In possession of this great secret, I became an activist of a sort to reveal these identifiers as insufficient to describe a full breadth and depth of a person. **I also found myself living the lessons I learned: it was perfectly okay to be neither fully Korean, nor American. I could be a high-achieving, competitive young woman not afraid of embracing those attributes traditionally deemed “feminine,” all the while proudly declaring Women’s Studies as my major.** In retrospect, my “weird” subjects pointed me to spaces between, beyond, and above the discrete categories of nationality and sex, allowing me to grow comfortable in my skin and desires.

The irony — that my academic pursuits in Women’s Studies led to my rejection of definitive categories, including “feminine” — could be consistent with the modern debate about the discipline. Women’s Studies might collapse under its own weight. Having expanded and reached out to other modes of inquiry, Women’s Studies might soon become an historical subset of cultural anthropology, sociology, and/or queer studies. But these concerns illustrate the very point of its existence. Women’s Studies is closely in keeping with contemporaneous changes in the society and in academia alike, precisely because it had always been a critical (and self-critical) agent of change — a very good activist, in my opinion.

So from what I see, the discipline of Women’s Studies brims with intellectual potential translatable into action. However, while feminist scholars formulate theories for the marginalized of the society, their language is often inaccessible to those who need to comprehend it the most. I wish to bridge that gap. Most notably, **Women’s Studies acquainted me with body politics and body philosophies that reaffirmed my decision to become a doctor.** As an aspiring physician (OB/GYN is a very likely choice) and a medical anthropologist (if my family life allows room for another degree), I want to restore the full gift of the body to the underserved so that they can live, as Judith Butler aptly put it, “permeably” amongst other healthy loving individuals. **Bodies must not be manipulated as physical badges that structure people into men or women, black or white, but appreciated as tools for enacting valuable knowledge.** Thanks to Women’s Studies, today I am most certainly, an individual inhabiting this valuable body.

- **Incorporate more faculty from behavioral and natural sciences and the professional schools into the program** The SXL program has designed events to integrate behavioral & natural sciences and the professional schools. A meeting was held with behavioral science faculty to explore plans for activities that might integrate their fields into the program. The SXL advisory board currently has one faculty member from the sciences.
- **Seek additional sources of funding** The social science review noted the difficulty of finding funding for the sexuality studies field. We have been in dialogue with one local possibility, the Josiah Charles Trent Memorial Foundation, which offers a grant in Human Sexual Function.
- **Recruit students through advertising** The program continues to co-sponsor **Profiles in Sexuality Research** with the Center for LGBT Life on a regular basis. These lunchtime sessions expose students to the ways that Duke faculty study LGBT issues and sexuality. Additionally, we plan to recruit students already enrolled in sexuality studies courses; attend majors fairs; and advertise in student publications.
- **Refine “student learning outcomes” to align with assessment measures** We will consult with the Office of Assessment and work with the advisory board to design effective ways to evaluate interdisciplinary knowledge about sexuality studies.

As the program in the study of sexualities at Duke moves into its second term, we welcome your thoughts and suggestions — please write ara.wilson@duke.edu

Spring 2011 Courses

WST 109S	Introduction to the Study of Sexualities – Ara Wilson	WST 168S	Gender, Sexuality and Human Rights – Ara Wilson
WST 135	Clinical Issues for LGBTQ – Janie Long	WST 170AS	Queer Theory – Robyn Wiegman
WST 140	Women at Work: Gendered Experience of Corporate Life – Martha Reeves	WST 171S	Gender, Sexuality and the Image – Kimberly Lamm
WST 150S	Pathologizing Race and Gender – Lindsey Andrews	WST 195S	Senior Seminar: Feminist Genealogies, the 1970s – Kathi Weeks
WST 159S	Thinking Gender – Robyn Wiegman	WST 205S	Debates in Women's Studies – Kathi Weeks
WST 166S	Nature, Culture and Gender – Kathy Rudy	WST 220	Foundations in Feminist Theory – Robyn Wiegman
WST 167S	Feminist Ethics – Kathy Rudy	WST 300	Affect and Feminism – Ranjana Khanna

An In-Depth Look at WST 170AS Queer Theory

**John loves curry. Hot, spicy, flaming curry.
Jane loves leather. Firm, tight, shining leather.**

What is the difference between John and Jane?

While John is free to lust over the Indian restaurant downtown, Jane's weekends at the leather bar are denounced as shameful and perverse. Why is this? Why are niche sexual preferences taken as indicators of dysfunction while unique positions on other taste continuums are considered benign? Queer Theory, a body of thought that has its roots in the late eighties and early nineties, uncovers and demystifies variation within the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. The course brings into question the widely accepted binaries that even the most LGBT-friendly among us have absorbed over the years (e.g. male/female, gay/straight, good/evil, sick/well). In reality, these dyads aren't as black and white as you may think. Queer theorists aim to open conceptual space for the shades of gray in between that so often go ignored or are condemned.

While gays and lesbians are highly visible in queer theoretical texts, the word "queer" here does not refer solely to homosexuality. Queerness is a broad concept which has been adopted by many groups that do not identify with traditional heterosexual scripts, including intersexed and transgendered individuals, fetishists, bisexuals, and BDSM practitioners. The word queer also functions as a verb within the context of this course when used to refer to the critical examination of established norms. "Queering gender," for instance, refers to the practice of questioning what it means to be masculine or

feminine. Queer theory holds that many taken-for-granted definitions are actually quite suspect given the range of self-expression we see in real people.

This course also examines the legal implications of various points on queer continuums. If you partner with someone of the same sex, will the law afford you the same luxuries awarded to heterosexual couples? If you have two long-term partners, will both have access to your children in the event of your passing? Does a 22-year-old deserve to be prosecuted for taking a nude picture of her 17-year-old girlfriend? Such controversial topics make for rich class discussions, all of which are facilitated by the smart and passionate **Robyn Wiegman**. Her guidance is essential when grappling with seminal texts such as Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (to name a few). Wiegman's class endows students with an essential foundation in a field of study that could be categorized as a combination of cultural anthropology, history, philosophy, public policy, linguistics, psychology and women's studies. Case in point, this class is *meta*. Students will emerge from **Queer Theory** with an enlightenment that goes beyond gender and sex to issues of identity and truth more generally.

Erin Bell is currently completing her MA in Management Studies at The Fuqua School of Business. She graduated from Duke in 2010 with a BA in Psychology and a Certificate in Sexuality Studies.

GRADUATE SCHOLARS COLLOQUIUM

by Colloquium Leaders Lindsey Andrews & China Medel

The 2010-11 Women's Studies Graduate Scholars Colloquium got off to a lively start this fall with a series of presentations that showcased the diverse range of projects and disciplines taken up by Women's Studies graduate students. We began in September with a roundtable discussing the structuring inquiry of this year's Women's Studies grad and faculty seminar, **Human, Animal, Gender**. Professors **Ranjana Khanna** and **Kathy Rudy**, with Women's Studies Postdoctoral Fellow **Kris Weller**, provided commentary on Derrida's piece, "The Animal That Therefore I Am," a piece all three considered foundational to the discourses addressed in the seminar. Members of the roundtable spoke to the way in which the question of the human and the animal is useful to feminist theory and their own projects within feminist studies. Professor Rudy began by engaging questions of our understanding of animals as "other," and the ways that affects our relationships to animals and animal rights activism. Professor Khanna then segued into a discussion of the multiple valences of the animal in Derrida's piece, and the repercussions of the ethical and linguistic implications of animal studies on marginalized people, and in particular, women. Finally, Weller turned the discussion toward the role of science, anthropology, and the law in investigating questions of the relationship between humans and animals, and the problems and promises inherent in that inquiry for feminism. It was an exciting opportunity for graduate students to informally engage with these scholars and to learn about the seminar.

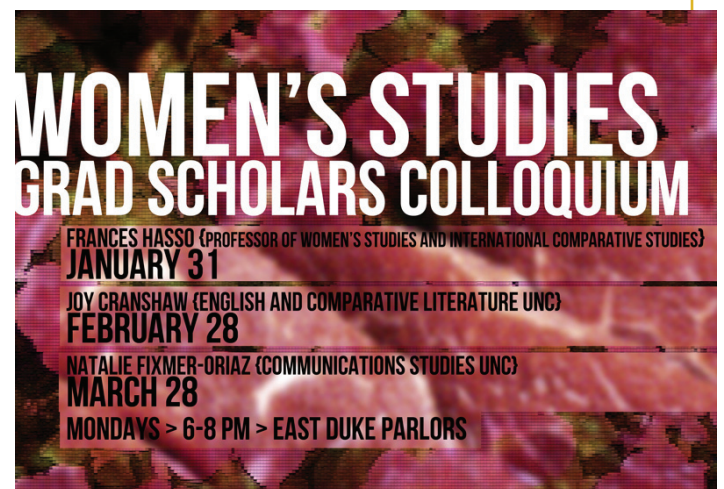
Our October meeting featured work by long-time colloquium participant **Erica Fretwell** (English). Erica circulated a dissertation chapter-in-progress, "Skin and Soul, or, What Does it Feel Like to Be a Problem?" on the role of the sense of touch and its relation to otherness in the works of W.E.B. DuBois and Helen Keller. Women's Studies Assistant Professor **Kimberly Lamm** responded to Erica's paper, pointing out the ways in which it uses touch to complicate the dominant visual paradigm. Additionally, she highlighted its resonances with the concept of chiasm (crossing) in the work of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, the idea of "the distribution of the sensible" in Rancière's work, and Luce Irigaray's exposure of the racialized and gendered assumptions under-girding phenomenology. The discussion was of great interest to those interested in disability studies and critical race studies, and much of the talk highlighted the underlying and complicated role of gender in thinking about race and the senses.

Recent PhD, **Beatriz Rodríguez-Balanta** (Romance Studies), presented her dissertation chapter, "The Fictional-Real: Chorographic Painting and the Visual Institution of Race, Colombia, 1853" at our November meeting. Beatriz's chapter looked at the way in which a style of paintings addressing different regions of Colombia did so within a racialized, visual lexicon that instituted colonial forms of racism within a liberal rhetoric of national statehood. African and African American Studies and Woman's Studies Professor **Jennifer Brody** provided commentary on Beatriz's paper, pointing out the way in which it usefully and insightfully complicated the "documentary" status of chorography, as producing, rather than exposing, racial difference. Professor Brody then followed up with some intriguing suggestions for complicating the analysis of race with regard to the multiple races featured in the paintings, and also the specificity of the gendered representations with regard to race. This opened the way for a lively discussion about the role of performance, biological discourses, and other genres of painting in producing nineteenth-century ideas of race.

We launched spring semester with Women's Studies' newest faculty member, Associate Professor **Frances Hasso** (also of International Comparative Studies and Sociology), who presented from her paper "The Governance Bargain Between Women and States in the Middle East." Cultural Anthropology and Women's Studies graduate student **Netta van Vliet** responded to Professor Hasso's work. Much of the discussion was centered around the differences between secular and non-secular law in the Middle East, and the competing strategies offered by each in the struggle for women's rights. It was an intriguing opportunity for all to think about the possibility of a transnational feminism.

To finish out this year, we're excited we'll be hearing from two UNC-Chapel Hill students earning the Certificate in Feminist Studies at Duke. **Joy Cranshaw** (UNC English and Comparative Literature), will present from a dissertation chapter on sexual reification and speciation in the works of Octavia Butler in February. Our March meeting will feature **Natalie Fixmer-Oriaz** (UNC Communications Studies) who will present from her dissertation on the politics of reproduction technologies. Anyone interested in the work of Women's Studies graduate students and faculty, please feel free to contact us for more information...the Grad Scholars Colloquium truly is an intellectual adventure!

china.medel@duke.edu. & lindsey.andrews@duke.edu



Othello and the Color of Character: *An Interview with Dr. Miles Parks Grier*



Heather Bennett

Miles Parks Grier is a 2010-2012 Provost's Postdoctoral Fellow in Women's Studies. He received his PhD in American Studies from New York University and is working on what he calls the "character industry," English speakers' use of alphabetic and theatrical characters to make invisible forms of character — such as rank, race, and reputation — visible in the era of slavery and colonialism. Additional interests include the role of African-American music in literature and protest, and the history of racial profiling.



Ashon Crawley is a doctoral student in the English Department at Duke. His work focuses on and uses Black Studies to think through sound and soundscapes, modes of insurgent personhood, and the Americas. In his own words, he cares about people and the world.

Miles, please tell us about yourself...

I am one of three scholars here at Duke on a two-year postdoctoral fellowship sponsored by the Provost's Office. A unique and helpful aspect of this program is that it links the junior scholar with a faculty mentor. I have the good fortune to have former director of Women's Studies, **Robyn Wiegman**, as my guide and advocate. I met Robyn two years ago at an American Studies Summer Institute in Dublin, and we forged a productive intellectual bond. Through Robyn, I have been introduced to a vibrant Women's Studies faculty and staff who have not only welcomed me but also provided a very stimulating intellectual community. My goal is to publish two to three articles during my time here and complete the manuscript for my first book.

Would you tell us what conversations you are engaging by framing for us the scholarship and research in which your work intervenes, what it cuts and augments, what it lays bare? Whom do you envision as your primary dialogue-partners in terms of the work?

I am working on a book manuscript entitled "Reading Black Characters: Atlantic Encounters with Othello, 1604-1855." These dates reflect the first recorded performance of Othello and the year

in which Herman Melville published *Benito Cereno*, a novel that borrowed from the play but reversed the colors of its lead roles. I was fascinated with the durability of Othello, especially since some historians insist that, in those centuries, European descendants moved from having no concept of race to founding social hierarchies on a steadfast belief in it. Typically, scholars date the emergence of race either to the late seventeenth-century when colonial law reserved lifetime, hereditary slavery for Africans alone or to the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the era of scientific racism, phrenology, and comparative anatomy. Yet, because of its insistence that people of different complexions have different capacities as readers and actors, Othello provides an opportunity to see the history of race from a new vantage point.

Despite the innovations that distinguish modern law and science, assumptions of natural inferiority have a longer genealogy. In the West, these date back to classical Athens, in which free Greeks thought of foreign slaves as mindless instruments and babbling speakers. These essential qualities were represented by an ink tattoo placed on the forehead called **stigmata** or, sometimes, **charagma** — the root of our word "character". Though the mark disappeared over time, the notion of inherent, fixed nature persisted in a strange blend of classical mythology

and the Bible: the so-called “race” of kings and bishops claimed descent from the Trojan heroes and from Saint Peter, while European serfs and foreign slaves were deemed the children of Ham.

The history of freedom as an ideal emerges after the discovery of the Americas. But it was not an abstract idea; it was rooted in the emergence of a pan-European identity declared deserving of freedom. The shedding of this burden of slavery was actually a transfer: *the new site of the character tattoo would be on the face or in the blood of the so-called negro, a perfect foil for the infinitely changeable white face and page. With this in mind, I see the various acts in which Atlantic World peoples changed their color as attempts to prove they should not be consigned to the permanent status of the slave. Applying rouge or powder, dressing above or below their station, cleansing their souls, and carrying real or forged identification — the actors, audiences, and readers of Othello demonstrate that literacy and theatricality truly made one’s social standing in a way that law and science belatedly attempted to contain and rationalize. Their activities are what I call “the character industry.”*

What emerges by placing your work within the field of Women’s Studies particularly and how is the rubric of gender studies embedded in your research and writing? That is, what’s sex/gender/love gotta do with it?

“Reading Black Characters” analyzes Aphra Behn and Abigail Adams, each of whom has been claimed by some as a feminist foremother. Following the lead of scholars who look at race and gender as mutually informing, I have seen it reconfirmed that gender for white women could be an adjunct to white privilege and not just a barrier to sharing patriarchal power. For example, Aphra Behn’s famous 1688 novella *Oroonoko* laments that the white female narrator lacked the power to stop male slaveholders’ cruelty. Yet, at the same time, she is

the recipient of tribute from an enslaved African prince who treats her as a knight would his lady — despite having his own black wife.

In a different way, Abigail Adams demonstrated the racial inflections of gender while traveling through Europe as a political wife. When the US was founded, it was not quite clear that it would join the economy dominated by European powers (certainly, we know that Haiti, founded not much later, was not allowed to join). Adams made a bid for the respectability — even superiority — of American white womanhood in her self-conscious fashion choices. She admired French women’s casual flair, considering a sign of an egalitarianism they shared with Americans. Yet, she tempered the hint of sexual license in their fashion with an ostentatious modesty Americans appropriated from British style. The fascinating moment in which Adams greets the Queen of England in an understated dress comprised of elaborately layered white fabrics, shows us the role that monitoring gender played in creating a sense of shared (if competing) white identities among women of European descent.

What will you be teaching next semester? How will your work translate into the classroom?

In Fall 2011, I will teach one of the core courses in Women’s Studies, *Race, Gender, and Sexuality*. *My syllabus will focus on the central role of gender, race, and sexuality in shaping the liberties and constraints that characterize early modern Europe, its American colonies, and the antebellum United States.* I will also invite students to make connections between the dynamics we discover in that era and current developments in American life. *Perhaps students will agree with a line I’ve stolen from Bergen Evans, “We may be through with the past, but the past is not through with us.”*

WOMEN'S ^{DUKE} STUDIES

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Spring 2011 Newsletter

Become a Friend of Women's Studies

Women's Studies stays in contact with over 5000 individuals however, less than 2% of those individuals are donors. Your gift of \$50 or more makes it possible to publish this newsletter or fund our teaching, research, and student support. Please consider supporting our continued outreach to alumnae/i by becoming a **Friend of Women's Studies**...as these individuals did (since December 2009). **Our deepest thanks to:**

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By the time you receive this newsletter the fifth annual **Feminist Theory Workshop** will have come and gone... each year our spring newsletter goes to press before the FTW and by the fall issue, it is long after. We've decided that our best way to address this unfortunate timing is to expand our coverage of the FTW online. Thanks to Marialana Weitzel, our website now features videos of all the keynote speakers from each year's event. So if you weren't one of the estimated 230 to attend this year, please visit <http://womenstudies.duke.edu/news/feminist-theory-workshop> to listen in on the fascinating keynotes that gave this year's FTW attendees a rich breadth of feminist issues to explore.

Fifth Annual Feminist Theory Workshop

a two-day event featuring keynote lectures
and working seminars at Duke University
March 18 and 19, 2011

Keynote lecturers:

- Anandavathi Jagannathan - Professor and Head of the School of Literature, Arts and Media, University of Sydney, Australia
- Donna Marway - Professor, History of Consciousness and Feminist Studies, University of California-Santa Cruz
- Rosalind Morris - Professor, Anthropology, Columbia University
- Pheng Cheah - Professor, Department of Rhetoric, University of California-Berkeley



WOMEN'S ^{DUKE} STUDIES

The workshop is free, but space is limited and registration is required. Register online at <http://womenstudies.duke.edu/news/feminist-theory-workshop>. 2011 registration no later than March 1, 2011. Workshop readings will be posted on the Workshop website. For more information please contact Lillian Spitzer at (919) 684-2770 or Lillian.Spitzer@duke.edu



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