Mercer to Head Institute

Christia Mercer, an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy, will assume the role of Interim Director at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender beginning in the Fall of 2000. She replaces Rosalind Morris, who is taking a sabbatical leave.

Professor Mercer assumes IRWaG’s Directorship after serving on its Executive Committee. Having worked on the undergraduate curriculum and having taught IRWaG’s introductory core course, “Feminist Texts I,” she has developed a deep fondness for IRWaG’s students, and great respect for its faculty. She has also developed a sense of mission for the place.

A historian of philosophy concerned with the early modern period, Mercer is a scholar of Leibniz with a passion for asking troubling questions about the ‘Great Men’ of history and science. Recently, she spoke to Feminist News of her work as an intellectual trouble-maker, and of her hopes and ambitions for IRWaG.

“One of the points of my work is to confound people,” says Mercer. “For most people trained in the humanities, modern science and philosophy were invented by Galileo, Descartes, Leibniz, and those supposedly enlightened souls who are reputed to have shed the prejudices of the God-fearing scholastics. We all learned a neat and tidy tale about the Rationalists and Empiricists in which Descartes and Galileo invented modern science and philosophy. Each of the subsequent “Great” men corrected an error of his predecessor until the march to Kant was completed.

“It’s a very nice and even inspiring story, but it is

Director’s Column

By Rosalind Morris

As a new semester begins with Autumn in the air, it’s hard to believe that we all began the year in a frenzy of millennial anticipation. Looking back over the months since then, one takes solace in the fact that the worst prophecies of catastrophe turned out to be vacant paranoia. In fact, the first months of 2000 gave more occasion to celebrate than to panic. But like all calendrical transitions, the drama of the millennium also provided the opportunity to reflect on our accomplishments and to think again about our future.

With a sense of great achievement, IRWaG completed its review of the undergraduate curriculum, and ended the 1999–2000 academic year with a newly formulated, more vigorous degree program on the books. A

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similar review of the program of graduate certification is nearing its completion and as it does so attention turns to the other aspects of our endeavor: to research and scholarship, to the questions of intellectual community, and to the project of radical interdisciplinarity.

As always, IRWaG hosted a cornucopia of events last semester. Our three symposia series, “Feminist Interventions,” “In the House,” and “Occasional Lectures,” brought to campus scholars and cultural producers from all over the world. The issues addressed there, in slightly different formats, ranged from welfare state policy to seventeenth century protestantism, from the psychic effects of economic transformation in post-Soviet Russia to the lives of women on Wall Street. Moreover, the diversity of topics was mirrored by a diversity of disciplines. From the conversations across national and linguistic boundaries there emerged other conversations: about problems of conceptual translation, about the pressures of globalization, and the new conditions of labor that limit the kinds of work we do—in both academic and non-academic contexts.

Of course, it is exciting just to hear of good work that is being done elsewhere. Most of us love to travel in mind and body to the sites at which colleagues are producing their work, and to be heard there as well. We want our books to move across the globe, and we want to access the lives of words and things elsewhere. But the excitement of internationalist gestures needs also to be coupled with a reflection on what it means to traverse these boundaries. It is not enough to seek representativeness: to have people from myriad places, of myriad identities, at conferences and in our departments—though that too is important, even essential. We also need to reflect on the conditions within which people of different places can pursue different ideas and interventions. We need to understand what the consequences of social and political difference are for intellectual labor and everyday life. And we need to understand when and where, how and why, we can and should (or should not) work to change these conditions, and how our own desires for exchange may be impinging on other places.

In short, it is not enough to globalize ourselves. We need to critically analyze the processes and the effects of globalization. It is for this reason that IRWaG has moved recently to enhance its capacity to address such issues—by hiring new faculty, by revising the curriculum and offering more innovative courses, by opening our doors and reaching out to the public of New York City through initiatives like “Feminist Interventions.” We will continue to work on topics like these throughout the coming year and into the future.

Sometimes, it’s difficult to imagine just how different things were three decades ago, when there were virtually no courses on gender, when questions of sexuality were generally taboo in classrooms, when it took a lot of Director’s, continued on page 1
The Success of the Feminist Pedagogy Workshop

Most feminist graduate students arrive at their first job with little teaching experience and limited exposure to formal pedagogical training. They want a tool kit in which feminist methods have pride of place, and they aren’t sure where to find such things. The Institute for Research on Women and Gender provides advanced graduate students with precisely the skills that will enable feminist scholars to become feminist teachers, through a voluntary one-unit workshop offered each spring.

Last spring, the Workshop was led by Rachel Adams and Julie Crawford, both of the English Department, and by all accounts, it was a smashing success. Feminist News recently spoke with professors Adams and Crawford about their experience.

This year’s Workshop included students from the Departments of Art History, History, and English and Comparative Literature. Their interests ranged from Greek and Roman art to early modern drama to international human rights to twentieth-century American history. Crawford comments that because of the diversity of the group, “the class talked a lot about interdisciplinarity in teaching.” Adams adds, “All the members had really profound commitments to their disciplines. Coming from a department that has no real disciplinary core, I found it very interesting to speak to historians and art historians who have a firm sense of their discipline’s methods and materials.”

Although the members of the class came from different disciplinary backgrounds, they found they had many common concerns. Crawford says, “I think the people who joined the class were all looking for a feminist community. They are feminist graduate students who don’t feel they have a lot of resources.” The students also shared a commitment to teaching and to feminist scholarship. Adams reports, “They were all very invested in becoming good teachers and in finding ways not to compromise politics and intellectual commitments.”

Throughout the term, the class dealt with a range of issues. Crawford notes, “The class ran the gamut from big methodological and political issues to local things, like how to get students to read. We considered how to introduce non-gender-specific language in the classroom; how to handle actively anti-feminist students; and how to expand a syllabus to include non-traditional materials.”

The course consisted of three sessions. In the first of these, Workshop members discussed the practice of teaching, all members suggesting approaches and assignments. According to Crawford, both professors and students gleaned excellent teaching ideas at every session. She comments, “Each meeting was useful to us all.”

A key subject of conversation at the first session was how to introduce feminist topics—should one make feminist methodology implicit or explicit in the classroom? Crawford elucidates this question, “should you say ‘I am using a feminist methodology’ explicitly, or should you instead make this methodology an implicit part of the class, informing the types of questions that are asked, interventions into assumptions, and interventions into canons?”

The students in the Workshop came up with many practical ideas that reflect an “implicit” approach. One participant suggested asking students to compare a feminist scholarly article with a non-feminist article dealing with the same subject, and to identify the scholars’ critical investments and methodologies. Many of the Workshop participants also emphasized the importance of having students examine primary sources.

“The class ran the gamut from big methodological and political issues to local things, like how to get students to read.”
 spiraling tower, also made pots
and pans, winter coats, and a
stove. She asks, “What kind of
story can we tell if we take these
objects as seriously as the
Monument, just as Tatlin did?”
Her “mascot of Constructivism,” is
a photomontage ad that Aleksandr
Rodchenko made for Red October
brand cookies. In this ad, “a
parade of cookies are jostling
their way into a little girl’s
mouth.” She explains, “The
cookies are a metaphor for the
socialist object that will transform
the new Soviet subject.”

According to Kiaer, the ad
suggests that the Constructivists
acknowledged bodily pleasure
and consumer desire. She
contends that because of this
recognition, “the Constructivists’
theorization of Marxism in their
writings and objects might have
turned out a lot
better in practice
than what the
Bolsheviks actually
came up with. Like
Walter Benjamin,
they saw that
socialism needed
to find a way to
embrace, rather
than aesthetically
reject, the
wonderful
abundance of
things made
possible by the
industrial
revolution.” The
result of their
endeavors was “a
socialist rethinking
of the commodity.
They were going to
make everyday
objects that were ‘other’ to
commodities in the Western
world, but that performed a
function as objects of desire.”

Although the Constructivists
were mostly men, Kiaer also
considers in her book the work of
two women, Varvara F. Stepanova
and Liubov Popova, both of whom
designed textiles and clothing.
These women were the only
Constructivists who worked in a
factory and achieved the
Constructivist goal of having
their works mass produced.
Professor Kiaer presented her
work on these women last
semester at IRWaG as part of the
“In the House” lecture series.

Professor Kiaer was born in
Denmark and lived there until
she was nine, spending a year in
Prague before moving to America
at age ten. Her family settled in
a suburb of Buffalo, where she attended public schools. She was initially drawn to study art history during her first year at Harvard College, when she discovered the social history of art in an introductory art history class given by T.J. Clark. She was at this time “a budding young Marxist,” studying Russian and eventually writing her senior thesis with Clark on Russian Constructivist photomontage. During this period she also developed an avid interest in feminist scholarship. What she calls her feminist “conversion” was precipitated by a feminist teaching assistant in a Core course on the history of science, who suggested that she investigate reproductive technologies as a paper topic. After she received her BA, Kiaer pursued her growing interest in reproductive technologies in Europe.

Upon graduating from Harvard, Professor Kiaer was granted a Fulbright to conduct research on women’s history in Denmark. At the University of Copenhagen, she entered a women’s studies certificate program. Having gained access to extensive government archives, she researched the history of abortion rights in Denmark.

In the 1930s, the Danish government set up an agency which held the power to grant permission for legal abortions. “If you could prove that bearing a child would be deleterious to your health or your social life, you were granted permission. At first there were just a couple of social workers with little leather brief cases, who would visit working class women and write up one-page reports on their situations. Year after year, the investigation procedure became increasingly medicalized and psychologized. By the 1960s, when the great majority of all requests were granted, they had huge file folders on each woman.” Kiaer wrote an extensive paper on her research, which was published in an anthology in Denmark. She then produced a video about her topic, thus fulfilling the University of Copenhagen’s requirement that every scholar “mediate academic work for a broader public.” While at the University, she became involved with a radical organization called FINRAGE (Feminist International Network Against Reproductive Technologies and Genetic Engineering). Her Fulbright paid for a trip to Majorca for a FINRAGE conference, where she met with other European feminist activists. After completing the women’s studies program, Kiaer worked in Copenhagen at the World Health Organization as the consultant on women’s health issues. The job consisted, she says, of both “harassing” managers within the World Health Organization to support projects related to women’s health and initiating new projects.

For her graduate work, Professor Kiaer turned from the politics of women’s health to political art. Having decided against pursuing graduate work in world health, Kiaer returned to the United States in the late 1980s to study art history at Berkeley with T.J. Clark and Anne Wagner, turning once again to the work of the Constructivists. As a graduate student, she had the opportunity to study with many feminist scholars, including Kaja Silverman, and Teresa de Lauretis whose seminar on Freud she attended in Santa Cruz. To conduct research for her dissertation, she spent sixteen months in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In Russia, she met the Benjamin scholar Susan Buck-Morss, who was lecturing at the Institute of Philosophy in Moscow, and the two women became friends. Their discussions about mass production and consumption led to what Kiaer calls a “turning point” in her work. She comments, “These discussions opened up a vista for thinking about the socialist object.”

At Columbia, Professor Kiaer has developed classes in her areas of expertise: feminist and women’s art, modernism, and the Russian avant-garde. This semester, she will teach her popular graduate lecture course, “Feminist Theories and Feminist Art Practices from the Sixties to the Nineties.” The course simultaneously traces developments in feminist theory against pursuing graduate work in world health, Kiaer returned to the United States in the late 1980s to study art history at Berkeley with T.J. Clark and Anne Wagner, turning once again to the work of the Constructivists. As a graduate student, she had the opportunity to study with many feminist scholars, including Kaja Silverman, and Teresa de Lauretis whose seminar on

“While Constructivism is often seen as a masculinist avant garde, I believe it has something to say to feminism.”
Mr. Foucault Goes to Washington, or: Why We Need Queer Theory

By Eliza Byard

In the last week of June, the Justices of the Supreme Court announced the arrival of a new juridical subject in their majority opinion in Boy Scouts of America v. Dale. Students of Foucault, take note. In The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Foucault identified “the homosexual” as a creation of medical science through processes that began at the end of 19th century: while previously “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual [is] now a species.” This creature’s identity is entirely defined by sexuality, which is “everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions.”

Adjusting to a changed political climate at the dawn of the 21st century, the Supreme Court has given legal life to a mutant form of this species—the “avowed homosexual”—whose identity and being are suffused with both sexuality and political meaning, and whose mere physical presence imparts a message even in the absence of speech or action.

Who or what is an “avowed homosexual”? Well, James Dale, for one. Chief Justice William Rehnquist, writing for the majority, identified James Dale as “an avowed homosexual and gay rights activist.” No further explanation of the term is given. Boy Scouts of America (BSA) says that an avowed homosexual is not “morally straight” or “clean” and “is not a role model for the values espoused in the Scout Oath and Law.” Consequently, according to a 1993 BSA position statement, the Scouts “do not allow for the registration of avowed homosexuals as members or as leaders of the BSA.” But nowhere do they say who belongs in that category.

There is, in the Court’s majority opinion, an assumed link between the avowed homosexual and “homosexual conduct.” Rehnquist argues that the Boy Scouts “takes an official position with respect to homosexual conduct,” and that is sufficient for First Amendment purposes to establish a collective right to protect BSA’s “expressive association” against the presence of an avowed homosexual. But, once again, neither the BSA nor Rehnquist ever tells us what, precisely, constitutes “homosexual conduct.” It’s not too hard to guess what the Boy Scouts are afraid of when they use the term, but there is, at present, no standard legal definition. What about kissing, hugging, or holding hands with someone of the same sex? Or camping it up or wearing drag, for that matter? Or being aroused by sex between two women, as many “heterosexual” men seem to be?

Presumably, an avowed homosexual is an out gay man or lesbian. By coming out, the avowed homosexual embodies both a message with political implications (“I am a gay person”) and the omni-present sexuality of the garden-variety homosexual (particularly troublesome for such a bastion of homosociality and pre-pubescent experimentation as the Boy Scouts). In Rehnquist’s words, “the presence of an avowed homosexual … in an assistant scoutmaster’s uniform sends a distinctly different message from the presence of a heterosexual assistant scoutmaster who is on record as disagreeing with Boy Scouts policy [on homosexuality].” This embodiment of sexuality and meaning is more potent than actual political speech.

Consider what added legal force this gives to the closet, or Eve Sedgwick’s “regime of the open secret.” Now, in the eyes of the law, coming out not only reveals you to be a member of the species “homosexual,” but moves you into the subspecies “avowed homosexual” and may, according to the Supreme Court of the United States, deprive you of the protection of existing civil rights laws. Is this “don’t ask, don’t tell” as a national policy? The current proliferation of anti-gay referenda and legislation provide a troubling picture of the ways in which this new identity could become the subject of police power. What about “promoting homosexuality” in schools? (An initiative on the ballot in Oregon this fall would prohibit the “promotion of homosexuality” by schools, in imitation of an existing law in England.) One could presumably teach as a simple “homosexual,”
since no one would know for sure what you were. The presence of an “avowed homosexual” as a teacher, however, would send a dangerous and illegal message to students. What about parenting and adoption rights? Only if you stay silent. The right to have a union respected by the law and society? Forget it.

Anyone concerned about the current resonance and relevance of queer theory and efforts to problematize understandings of sexuality and identity need look no further.

The two dissenting opinions issued in the Dale case reveal an effort on the part of Justices Stevens, Ginsburg, Souter, and Breyer to separate acts from identity and move away from simplistic and totalizing approaches to these issues. As the old, race-based civil rights paradigm for gay rights arguments runs out of steam, and identity politics lose force across the board, there may be room for alternative models and ideas for resistance to state power to define our selves.

“IT’s odd, and a bit disturbing. In truth,” she admits, ”some of this may reflect IRWaG’s relatively limited offerings in Queer Studies classes. But at a time when so much legislation is taking back the rights won by gays and lesbians and transgendered people, we need to understand why the issue has become so marginal in our own institutional practice and for our students (see the article by Eliza Byard in this issue). We feel that IRWaG can be doing more to introduce students to these issues, and working harder to provide faculty with an environment where they can pursue them with rigor and intensity. The symposium series is a first step in that direction. It puts the topic on the table, creates a public forum, and promises both community and edification.”

“Queer Futures,” will have three events this year: a panel of Columbia and Barnard Faculty, discussing the history and future of comparative historical studies of sexuality; a panel of younger queer scholars from other institutions discussing the future of Queer Studies; and a key-note lecture on the state of the art in Queer Studies. Announcements for the events will be posted on IRWaG’s web-site, and advertised on campus. Everyone is welcome to attend all the events, which will be free.

Did you know?

The Institute for Research on Women and Gender offers an annual prize for the best essay written by an undergraduate on any topic in Queer Studies.

2 submission dates, 1 prize

$300.00

For more information and application forms, come by the office at IRWaG

763 Schermerhorn Hall Extension
Phone: (212) 854-3277
Central America, she decided to make a brief stop in Condega, where she had some contacts at The Women’s Construction Collective (La Asociación Colectivo de Mujeres Constructoras de Condega). The Construction Collective is a women’s group that has trained women in carpentry and building construction for about ten years. Suarez explains, “when women’s building brigades came to Condega from Germany, England and the U.S. to help build a school.” The 1980s, Suarez points out, was “a time of a lot of international solidarity work in Nicaragua. Sometimes people would come to help pick coffee. Sometimes they would come to help rebuild schools and health centers, which the Contras were destroying using U.S. funds.” After the school project was completed, a group of women in Condega continued to learn about construction and to build, and by the early 1990s they were offering courses in construction and carpentry to women from Condega and the surrounding countryside. Funding from international granting sources now enables them to offer such classes free of charge. Suarez reports that students at the Construction Collective include women of all ages: “A lot of the new recruits are young girls. Some of them come to Condega from rural areas to go to high school.” Although many of these women do not choose carpentry as a career, Suarez says, “The empowerment and self-esteem that they get from building something themselves and learning a skill is invaluable.”

The Construction Collective is part of a widespread women’s movement in Nicaragua, which first emerged during the Sandinista Revolution in the late 1970s. Although the revolution created new roles and new opportunities for women as soldiers and organizers, women in Nicaragua, Suarez says, “still do more of the housework and child care than men, and they still have less access to education.” They are also rarely property owners. It was in part because women in Condega did not hold deeds to property that they were not allocated new homes after the hurricane.

Suarez reports of her first visit to Condega, “Because it is a small town with no tourist attractions, the main thing that I did while I was there was stop by the women’s workshop to see what they were doing. Having nothing better to do with my time I asked if I could help.” Her interest in the Construction Collective reflects a longstanding excitement about building. “I’m kind of an amateur builder. My father is an architect and an amateur carpenter. I enjoyed helping him build shelves and sheds.” Subsequently, she worked at the Construction Collective for a week, during which time she lived with a project forewoman. “We would come home, take showers, eat dinner, and then talk late into the night.

“Whatever sweat equity they put into the building goes towards paying for the house. The homes are not just a hand out.”
We connected on some level about our experience as women in non-traditional trades.” At that time, Suarez held Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in the male-dominated field of computer science and had been working as computer systems programmer at AcIS for nine years.

When the hurricane struck a year after Suarez’s visit to Condega, she was not only working full-time at AcIS, but she was also completing her senior thesis at IRWaG, “‘Ay! Tomboy pala!’: Rethinking Lesbian Identity in a Philippine Context,” an essay which won the Undergraduate Queer Studies Paper Award. “This was a really stressful time for me,” Suarez reports. “While I was finishing my thesis I was also collecting donations to send down to Condega for emergency relief.” Her fund-raising efforts, which began as what she calls a “casual involvement,” that is, “collecting tens and twenties from friends, co-workers and family,” rapidly transformed into a nonprofit organization. A plea for help from the Construction Collective initiated this metamorphosis. The Collective had identified thirty women left homeless by the hurricane and planned to help these women, many of whom were single mothers, to build houses for themselves. Having secured land and some funds, they appealed to Suarez for help. She explains, “They needed women to help teach construction; they needed volunteers to help with the labor; and they needed money for materials.” So all of sudden her casual involvement became something more.

At the suggestion of friends, she obtained a not-for-profit fiscal sponsor, MADRE, an international women’s human rights organization, and she continued to raise money. She also gathered together a brigade of seven women, all but one from the U.S., who traveled with her to Condega in February 1999 to help start the construction. By the time she left for Condega, she and her fellow “brigadistas” had amassed 5,500 dollars; their group also had a logo and a name, The Condega Homemakers Project. She and her group of volunteers had a lot to learn. “We all had to learn everything,” she explains, “and I’ve learned a lot. I now know how to square and level a foundation, how to start a foundation for a house. The buildings are cement-reinforced concrete frames around concrete block construction. A professional mason would be able to lay blocks better and quicker than we would. But we have learned how to do it.” The women being housed also often participated actively in the construction, hauling water or pouring cement. Suarez comments, “Whatever sweat equity they put into the building goes towards paying for the house. The homes are not just a hand out.” She notes that the current trend in micro-lending is to attempt to empower people by helping them to earn what they receive.

When she returned to New York, she and some volunteers for CHP worked on a proposal, which enabled them to secure a large grant from the American Jewish World Service as well as additional monies from the Daniele Agostino Foundation and other funders. All in all, the group raised an impressive sixty-eight thousand dollars, funds which allowed them to purchase building materials and equipment, such as a cement mixer and a generator. The funds also allowed them to send more brigades of volunteers to Condega. Last October, together with the third brigade and Nicaraguan workers, Suarez

Suarez, continued on page 10
helped put the finishing touches on the last houses.

The twenty-seven houses built by the Construction Collective with the help of the Homemakers Project constitute a women’s neighborhood, which is called by its inhabitants “The Community of Women United” (“La Comunidad de Mujeres Unidas”). Each home in the community is equipped with plumbing and electrical systems, though running water and electricity have not yet been provided in the area. Suarez reports, “The project has been a success. People are still really poor and many are jobless, but at least they now have houses.” The new community has also altered the lives of its inhabitants in less tangible ways. Suarez comments, “I’ve heard stories about how men think twice before they walk into the women’s neighborhood. One of the women living in the community announced that ‘domestic violence will not be tolerated in this neighborhood.’ It’s great.” Suarez and her fellow volunteers have also benefited from this work. “We brigadistas had a really great experience working with the Nicaraguan women and vice versa. It has been a growth experience for everybody."

The construction project has had a profound impact on Suarez’s life. “This has been a topsy-turvy time for me,” she confesses. "I have had two full-time jobs." Now she only has one. This past June, after eleven years of service, she quit her job as Lead Systems Programmer at AcIS in order to pursue her work with Nicaraguan women, giving up a Columbia apartment and many other benefits. She adds, "It’s the biggest decision I’ve ever made and it feels good. I want to go in this direction and see where it leads me.” Since she enjoyed taking a leadership role in the construction in Condega, she speculates that she may go on to teach building or carpentry. “In October, since I had already been building in Condega and knew the ropes, I was in a teaching position. Although there was a lot that I still needed to learn, I was able to pass on what I already knew.”

There is still work to be accomplished in Condega. In the two remaining lots in the Community of Women, the Construction Collective plans to build a women’s health and recreation center. The Collective needs funds to continue to teach skills such as building, iron-work and carpentry. Suarez reports, “Since these women did such a good job building their own neighborhood, they are getting contracts for outside projects. It’s becoming a sustainable development model.” Recently, the group was awarded the contract for a new housing development for elderly people. In her work, Suarez shares the two principal goals of the Women’s Collective: to support women in non-traditional trades and to empower women socially and economically by teaching them a trade. As a result of the recent building projects she has helped to support, Suarez says, “all sorts of social space has been opened up to women. Some are coming out as lesbians; some are feeling more empowered to make their male children do the housework, and some of them are standing up to their abusive boyfriends or husbands.”

The Condega Homemakers Project still needs both funds and volunteers to build in Nicaragua and to write grant proposals. If you are interested in learning more about their efforts, you can go to their website at www.homemakers.org.
Faculty Book Picks

Each semester, members of the IRWaG faculty write about books they have recently read and wish to recommend to our readers.

Reviewed by:
Professor Lila Abu-Lughod
Department of Anthropology

Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America

This is a model of contemporary feminist ethnography. It is a thought-provoking book about amniocentesis, written in a clear and compelling manner, that gives poignant and balanced insight into the social impact of this new reproductive technology. It takes us into the brave new worlds created by scientific knowledge and explores how scientific work gets translated into the everyday lives of pregnant American women who find themselves thrust into the role of what anthropologist Rayna Rapp calls “moral pioneers.” The result of a decade of multi-sited research into how genetic knowledge is embedded in their fetus. Many scholars pay lip service to the intersection of gender with race, culture, and class. But this book follows through, in the most profound and human way, through sympathetic fieldwork in a range of communities in New York City, the real differences these make in women’s attitudes, decisions, and structures of possibility. None of what I have said captures the power of this book. Perhaps this will: I wept when I got to the chapters that juxtaposed reactions to the news that a genetic problem had been detected with the words and lives of families with Down syndrome children, unable to deal with the moral perplexity of modern choices and knowledge. When was the last time you cried reading a book in the social sciences?

Reviewed by:
Professor Jean Howard
Department of English and Comparative Literature

Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture

One of the most interesting feminist books I’ve read in the last few months is Frances E. Dolan’s Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture. Dolan asks what role Catholics played in the English imagination in the seventeenth century and why Catholics of both sexes were often gendered feminine. In answering these questions Dolan shows how domestic danger (the Catholic household in which women were fantasized as exercising inordinate and perverse power) became figured as national threat. She further argues that because Catholic difference was not marked on the body and because England itself had so lately been a Catholic country, Catholics were especially frightening because they were “not different enough.” As a result, free floating anxiety about imperceptible traitors within the national body could merge with longstanding assumptions of female duplicity to transform the Catholic woman, as a figure for Catholicism itself, into a specter of monstrous criminality and danger.

What I particularly like about this book is its close historical work with a range of texts that span both the early and late seventeenth century, its emphasis on the importance of Protestant print culture in the constitution and dissemination of a pervasive cultural mythology of domestic aliens, and its sophisticated use of feminist theory to de-essentialize the relationship between female bodies and a discourse of dangerous femininity.
Pedagogy, continued from page 3

In the second part of the course, students met with librarians trained in pedagogy and electronic resources at the Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CNMTL) to explore internet resources. Crawford reports that the class considered “everything from finding on-line archives, to locating grants or activist websites.” One central question about internet information that students raised was how to distinguish useful material from worthless material. Regarding the class’ investigation of witchcraft sites, for example, Crawford comments, “There are some amazing scholarly sites on witchcraft that provide the full text of historical documents with commentary by scholars, but there are also wacky sites out there.” Crawford notes that the key difference is references. She says, “Look for real accreditation.” Of the second session, Crawford says, “the students came up with an excellent collection of resources.” She and Professor Adams plan to incorporate links to sites discovered by the class into the IRWaG website.

The electronic classroom brings up a range of questions about authority and respect.

At the second session, students brought up a new set of issues having to do with technology in its relation to gender and authority. Adams comments, “The electronic classroom brings up a range of questions about authority and respect. A member of the Workshop brought up a typical problem; a student in her class posted comments on a bulletin board that were disrespectful to classmates.” The group considered the question, “If you want to use a bulletin board, how do you regulate students’ responses?” Crawford adds, “We talked about protocols, how to talk to your students about what it means to be in an intellectual community, and what it means to listen to, and to respect other peoples voices.”

For the third session, students were asked to formulate syllabi for either a dream class or an introductory class. The two classicist art historians, Elizabeth Marlowe and Rebecca Molholt collaborated on an “Introduction to Greek and Roman Art.” Adams comments, “It is a survey course, into which they integrate feminist methodologies; they have a section on pottery, and one on domestic space. Ellen MacKay, a student in the English Department, wrote a syllabus for “Gender and Tragedy: A Seminar in Early Modern Theater,” an advanced class that focuses on the ways in which gender transgressions precipitate tragedy in early modern plays. The syllabus includes not only plays but histories of the period, feminist theory, websites with archival material, and films. Mona Nicoara, also from the English Department, wrote a syllabus for a “dream course” called “Gender and Development,” which concentrates on gender in relation to theories and practices of colonialism, nationalism, development, and globalization. Sharon Musher, a historian, created a syllabus for “Gender, Sex, and Feminism: Reconsidering Categories in Twentieth-Century America,” a class that focuses on how, when, and why twentieth-century feminisms succeeded and failed. The Workshop group discussed their rationales for these syllabi, and they talked about questions regarding syllabi, that they might be asked during job interviews.

Crawford and Adams agree that the Feminist Pedagogy Workshop offers an unusual opportunity both for new faculty members like themselves and for graduate students. Adams comments, “there are so few opportunities to talk about teaching, either with your colleagues or with your graduate students. The Workshop gives us a chance to talk about pedagogy that is institutionally supported.” The professors, who were neither paid nor given course release for teaching the class, agree that the university should provide more resources for this course and for others like it. Crawford comments, “With money and resources, there is much more that could be done with this class. Adams adds, “It would be extremely helpful to have a research assistant.” Both professors remark that IRWaG generously advertises the class, provides space for it, and pays for the class’s greatly-relished dinners.
energy just to bring the question of equity to a table. Enormous success has come to those who didn’t wait, but who acted. But there is still much to be done.

Ours is a time when legislative initiatives across the country seek to limit the rights of people who are gay or lesbian, or to exclude from citizenship those who practice alternative forms of sexual identification. Violence against gay and lesbian youths is the sordidly and increasingly common tale of front-page newspaper stories, a horrible accompaniment to the accounts of racial violence. At times like these, it behooves institutions like IRWaG to bring issues of sexuality to the fore of teaching and scholarly discussion.

For all our progress, the fact of domestic violence is still too prevalent. Indeed, as some may recall, it has claimed the lives of students of Columbia University. And despite our gains, there are still too many incidents like those in Central Park, when dozens of women were sexually assaulted in public following a parade. It will not be IRWaG’s place to solve these problems. But we do have the means to facilitate critical analytical thought about them, and thereby to find the means to both understand and address the state of social justice within which we live and think. In the pursuit of these difficult tasks, it is comforting to know that we are joined by others at Columbia University, and perhaps most especially by the other interdisciplinary programs, institutes and centers. For, it is inevitably at the boundary of traditional thought, that the daring and imagination to solve the problems of the future are to be found.

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and developments in women’s and feminist art. She comments, “Like my scholarship, the course is very historical. It presents a history of the women’s movement and other radical movements of the ’60s and ’70s. This is the first time a lot of these students are hearing about organizations like the SDS.” The class also looks at schisms within the women’s movement and considers the decline of activism in the 1980s and 1990s. Professor Kiaer remarks, “All of these things have a direct bearing on the artists we study.”

Professor Kiaer ends the class by discussing some major exhibitions that took place in the nineties. One of these exhibits, “Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s ‘The Dinner Party’ and Feminist Art History,” included both “The Dinner Party,” which was reconstructed for the first time since the early 1980s, and other women’s art produced between the 1960s and the 1990s. Kiaer remarks, “We look at the exhibition as a case study of the essentialism debate within feminist art history.” The emphasis on Judy Chicago here has a special relevance for the class. Kiaer explains, “One of my aims for the class was to destroy the notion that there ever was anything so simple as an unreflective, essentialist feminism. We discuss how ‘The Dinner Party,’ which is often seen as the worst offender, is really involved in practices of minimalist art. For example, Judy Chicago was part of a California school of minimalist art called Finish Fetish, which helps to make sense of the weird, phosphorescent surfaces of ‘The Dinner Party.’”

Professor Kiaer’s next project, which was inspired by a graduate seminar she taught last fall on the Russian avant-garde, will focus on Soviet Socialist Realism, which she teaches as “the big other to modernism.” As a case study, she plans to look at the work of the painter Aleksandr Deineka. Describing his paintings, she says, “They are flat, angular, and idiosyncratic—they’re good art. And they are full of eroticized male and female bodies.” Kiaer plans to discuss the eroticism of Deineka’s art, and homoeroticism in Socialist Realism overall. For art historians, she says, socialist realism is like “a big hairy beast in the room that no one wants to talk about.” However, she adds, “It’s not a little thing. Figurative painting represents most of the art made in most of the world during this period. There are more paintings that look like socialist realist paintings than there are paintings that look like Jackson Pollocks—even in America.” The new project offers her an opportunity to discuss alternative versions of modernity and to explore an interest in the Cold War. “We’re so used to setting America and the Soviet Union up in opposition. If you look at them side by side and ask questions about their similarities, rather than their differences, you can learn a lot more about what happened in this century.”
Mercer, continued from page 1

mostl fals.” Mercer is interested in telling a more accurate story. In her widely praised forthcoming book, Leibniz’s Metaphysics, she takes on the hoary myths and heart-warming narratives with which we have deluded ourselves for so long.

“For most of the twentieth century, historians of philosophy have felt the need to justify their analysis of historical figures by making them relevant to contemporary philosophy. Beginning in 1900, due to a book written by Bertrand Russell, Leibniz was construed as a mathematician/logician who constructed his elaborate metaphysics on firm logical foundations. His views about God and his quirky methodological proposals were ignored. In brief, Russell cleverly turned Leibniz into a 17th century version of himself. “Because of the vastness of his writings (and because of the obscurity of these mostly unedited notes), scholars could easily publish, edit and translate only the logical papers, while ignoring much of the other material. In my book, I turn this whole tradition on its head. I place Leibniz in his proper historical situation (which has been misrepresented by German historians), analyze ignored texts, and show that the metaphysics developed out of a desire to forge intellectual and political peace in a war ravaged Germany, and that it’s foundations are not logical but theological.

Mercer says that her own rendition of Leibniz “surprises people,” including Leibniz scholars, and even angers some of them. It is a risky position to take, she admits. But, she claims, “their surprise is due to the fact that they assume that our early modern heroes were already fully modern.” It is true, she agrees, that Leibniz invented the calculus and made contributions in physics. “But there was no such thing as being strictly modern in the 17th century. Things were much more complex, and people could be both modern and traditional.”

“As it turns out, all of the Great Men used the past in important ways—even Galileo and Descartes—and our tidy tale has little to do with the complications of early modern science and philosophy. The story that is beginning to be told about the period makes it chaotic, confused, and very very interesting.”

“One of the points of my work is to confound people.”

For Mercer, the lessons of philosophy and the history of science have relevance to gender studies as well, and vice versa. Says Mercer, “Leibniz is just an excellent example of how the rejection of the ‘Great Man’ view of history pays off. There were lots of fascinating minor men and a few extremely clever women philosophers, who have been ignored, but who contributed mightily to the intellectual debate. For example, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, as it turns out, influenced Descartes in significant ways. Anne Conway was considered one of the foremost vitalists of her day. Because scholars have begun to reject the Great Man story, we have begun to unearth the texts and contributions made by such people. I teach both Elisabeth and Conway in my survey of philosophy and students love the work of these women. In short, there is a revolution underway in my field with the result that early modern philosophy and science look very different than they did just a few years ago.”

Some of the revisions that Mercer is pleased to have authored in her book on Leibniz are performed weekly in her class at IRWaG on the history of feminist scholarship. She remarks that, prior to the nineteenth century, there were few people who were prepared to argue for the equality of women or to question the accepted truth that women were morally inferior to men. For those few writers who dared to do so, their arguments—in order to have any persuasive power—had to use all the available assumptions about virtue, goodness, reason, etc. In fact, this was the case whether an author was arguing for the inferiority or for the equality of women.

“The majority of the texts required in both Lit. Hum. and CC are exactly those texts which treat the big questions about virtue, goodness, family, citizenship, and so on. Lit. Hum. and CC form the perfect background and context for my Fem. Texts course because they have laid the groundwork for almost any debate about human beings! For example, the fascinating debate between Abelard and Heloise (12th century) in their letters cannot be properly understood outside the context set by Augustine.
Moreover, knowing something about Dante’s Beatrice places Héloïse’s attitudes in an interesting light. Or a more obvious example, is the 16th c. feminist Marie de Gournay, whose scepticism was learned from her mentor, Montaigne. Montaigne, then, is the proper background for de Gournay.

“Not only does the core just make teaching the Fem. Texts easier, by setting the right intellectual context, it has prepared the students to think in subtle ways about exactly those issues that concerned early feminists.”

At the same time, according to Mercer, much of philosophy remains to be influenced by feminist thought. “The major influence that feminism has had on philosophy is in the area of ethics and political philosophy. People like Carol Gilligan and Eva Kittay have opened new terrain for philosophical inquiry and shifted the terms of debate in some areas.” But she observes that the field as a whole has not responded evenly. The point, however, is that feminist scholarship has entered philosophy in a variety of domains, and not merely in the analysis of women’s issues. This is true of much contemporary feminist thought, which is much more expansive in its reach and much less topically organized than it was twenty years ago. Everything is now grist for the mill.

But not everything is philosophy. For Mercer, “it is important that the Institute focus some of its issues on the legal and practical side of gender studies. For example, philosophical and legal debates about privacy, about same-sex marriage, etc., can impact social and legal practises.” She would like to see IRWaG work with the Law School more, and plans to arrange a one day conference on issues of privacy, gender, and the law (watch for announcements in the January Issue of Feminist News).

Mercer is also very pleased to see the development of new initiatives around Queer Studies at IRWaG. This year, a new symposium series will be devoted to consideration of the history and future mandate of Queer Studies, and the topic will also occupy the Curriculum Committee. Julie Crawford, the new Departmental Representative at IRWaG is going to co-organize the series with Kristina Milnor of Barnard College’s Classics Departments (see articles on Queer Theory in this issue of Feminist News). Says Mercer, “The legal and practical work on these issues needs also to be mirrored in the kinds of discussions that define our public discourse and in the courses that we offer.”

In addition, Mercer will oversee the third annual “Feminist Interventions” symposium series. This year’s program “is especially exciting. We’re going to continue with last year’s formula, mixing scholarly lectures with presentations of new cultural work. So, for example, Professor Teo Barolini is going to lecture on Dante and gender, and we’re going to feature an evening of readings by Asian American writers. In the Spring, Professor Jean Howard (a former director of IRWaG) is going to speak about Marxist Shakespeare, and Farah Jasmine Griffin is going to speak about female Jazz vocalists, featuring a live performance.”

Something else that excites Mercer is the sharing of such projects with other institutions. “This year,” says Mercer, “‘Feminist Interventions’ is being partly co-sponsored by other interdisciplinary centers at Columbia. And I am particularly happy that Bob O’Meally (Center for Jazz Studies) and Gary Okihiro (Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race) will join us in these events.”

The development of ties across disciplines and institutions reflects Mercer's ambition for IRWaG. It also reflects her understanding of gender studies at the turn of the millennium. From her perspective, “Gender Studies has begun a new chapter to the extent that it is no longer a question of studying women. It now represents a tool in scholarship—all scholarship. It doesn’t matter if you’re working on the history of suffragettes or on dead, white guys; you can and should employ gender categories when they are helpful as a means to scholarly goals.

Mercer is optimistic. She sees the strides in recent feminist scholarship as evidence of a turning tide, and even of a victory. "Feminism is becoming mainstream," she says. "That's good. It liberates many of us to do different kinds of work and to address the problems of gender equity on a variety of fronts without demanding that all of our work be devoted to the same problematic. At the moment, feminism means many different things, and it accommodates many differences. I want to see those differences manifested in the work we do at IRWaG."
### Feminist Interventions

**September 25, 2000:**
Teodolinda Barolini, Lorenzo Da Ponte Professor of Italian, Columbia University  
**Beyond Courtly Dualism: Thinking About Gender in Dante's Lyrics**  
Joan M. Ferrante responding  
8 PM, 501 Schermerhorn Hall

**October 30, 2000:**
**Asian-American Women Writers**  
Jessica Hagedorn (National Book Award Nominee), readings from *The Gangster of Love, Dogeaters,* and new work.  
Mei Ng, readings from *Eating Chinese Food Naked.*  
Cathy Park Hong (National Poetry Award Finalist), readings from *Translating Mo'um.*  
Co-sponsored by the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race, Columbia University  
8 PM, Davis Auditorium, 412 Schapiro Center

**February 12, 2001:**
Jean Howard, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University  
**Gender on the Periphery**  
Natalie B. Kampen responding  
8 PM, 501 Schermerhorn Hall

**March 26, 2001:**
Farah J. Griffin, Visiting Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University  
**BlueNotes and Butterflies: Thoughts on "The" Black Singing Voice**  
Robert G. O'Meally responding  
This talk will feature a live performance by a singing artist (TBA).  
Co-sponsored by The Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University  
8 PM, 301 Philosophy Hall

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