Columbia Welcomes Alice Kessler-Harris

The Institute for Research on Women and Gender is excited to announce the arrival at Columbia of Professor Alice Kessler-Harris. She joins the University faculty this semester, with a joint appointment at the Institute and in the History Department. Professor Jean Howard, Director of the Institute comments, “This is a magnificent coup for Columbia and for the Institute for Research on Women and Gender. Alice Kessler-Harris is one of the most outstanding feminist labor historians in the country, and she has been an important force in the establishment and growth of the field of women’s studies.”

Professor Kessler-Harris’s writings on women and work in America are celebrated and influential. Her books include, Women’s Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences (1990); Out to Work: A History of Wage Earning Women in the United States (1982), which won the Philip Taft Prize, and Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview (1981). She comes to Columbia from Rutgers University, where for five years she ran the Women’s Studies Program. Before her appointment at Rutgers, she taught at several other institutions, including Hofstra University, where she co-directed the Center for the Kessler-Harris, continued on page 2

Bynum Awarded Highest Honor

The Institute for Research on Women and Gender joins the Columbia University community to celebrate the appointment of Caroline Walker Bynum, distinguished scholar of Medieval culture, to the position of University Professor. Professor Bynum is the first woman at Columbia to receive this honor, the highest faculty distinction at Columbia. She joins a group of acclaimed members of the Columbia faculty, increasing the number of University Professors to eight: Edward Said, Eric R. Kandel, Simon Schama, Michael Riffaterre, Kent Greenawalt, Tsung-Dao Lee, and Ronald C.D. Breslow.

Columbia honors Professor Bynum for her achievement as a scholar and for her commitment as an educator. Jean Howard, Director of IRWAG, commented,

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Study of Work and Leisure; and Sarah Lawrence College, where she directed the Women’s History Program.

Professor Kessler-Harris’s major interest is in how working people have understood the world around them. In much of her work, she looks at the ways that culture and ideology have shaped, and been shaped by the institutions and practices of working men and women. Currently, she is finishing a new book, which she describes as “an exploration of the relationship between changing gender ideologies and some key twentieth century American social policies.” In the book, she examines a series of moments when opportunities are created to expand what she calls “economic citizenship.” According to Professor Kessler-Harris, economic citizenship (a concept that emerged from her research) identifies rights, privileges, and responsibilities that emerge from an individual’s relationship to economic resources, and particularly to their access to work. In this respect, it differs from political citizenship, which identifies rights and responsibilities that inhere in participation in the polity, and from social citizenship, which identifies rights that emerge from one’s location in a national or state community. Just as political citizenship opens the door to certain kinds of equality in the polity, so full economic citizenship would ensure equal access to economic equality. Historically, the two have not necessarily been linked, and in the case of women, Professor Kessler-Harris argues, the absence of economic citizen-

Director’s Column

I am writing this column just before the Christmas break, and celebration feels in order. All of us connected with the Institute are rejoicing that Alice Kessler-Harris will be joining the History and Gender Studies faculty this spring. Her stature as a scholar and her enthusiasm for the work of the Women’s Studies program have energized us all.

At the same time we wish to join with the entire university community in celebrating the selection of Caroline Bynum as a University Professor, the first woman to hold this distinguished position. Throughout her career, the study of women and of gender issues has steadily informed Caroline Bynum’s work, and her work has steadily transformed the field of Medieval Studies and had an impact far beyond it as well. We invite you to read profiles of Professors Bynum and Kessler-Harris on the front page of this newsletter.

I also feel like celebrating because once again our Women and Gender Studies’ majors have had a wonderful experience working together on their senior thesis projects. In December the Institute hosted a reception honoring our thesis writers, and you can read about them and their projects in the center pages of this newsletter. We are also delighted to announce that one of our majors, Abigail Zitin, has been elected to Phi Beta Kappa based on her academic work up through the junior year, and that she has also been awarded the prestigious Kellett Fellowship to Cambridge University for her next two years.

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Ellen Baker joined the Columbia faculty this fall as an Assistant Professor of History. The Columbia campus is familiar territory for Professor Baker, who majored in Women's Studies at Barnard College before pursuing graduate work in the Women's History Program at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. About her to return to New York City, she says, “I'm glad to be back in a city where the restaurants don't close at 9:00 PM.”

As an undergraduate at Barnard, Professor Baker worked with Professor Betsy Blackmar on a senior thesis dealing with women in the Populist movement. This research inspired her to continue to study women's roles in social and political movements at the University of Wisconsin. In Madison, her research focused on two themes: women's labor history and the history of the American west. Her dissertation, “Salt of the Earth,” combines these interests, adding a new emphasis on the ways in which historical events are represented and circulated. Professor Baker describes the subject of this project as “an unusual strike that took place among Chicano miners in the Southwest in which women, who were not miners themselves, took over the picket line and antics ensued.”

Her dissertation, “Salt of the Earth,” focuses on radical action in Chicano labor history. The work takes its name from a film about the strike made in 1953 by blacklisted Hollywood film-makers in collaboration with people who were involved in the strike. The film, which, Professor Baker reports, “became a cult movie on the left,” piqued her interest in the strike. But the film itself and its history held her interest as well. Her project, more than simply relating the trajectory of the strike, traces ways in which the history of the strike—as depicted in the film—was negotiated and told. The film-makers, Professor Baker explains, had an agenda. They were “trying to recast American popular culture by creating projects that would represent the dignity of working people.” However, she continues, “those depicted in the film had different ideas about how their story should be told and about how they should be represented.”

Professor Baker's dissertation focuses on relationships between various factions: not only between film-makers and miners but between men and women and between labor and capital. It tells a many-layered story of power relations and the negotiations they entail. Describing her project, Professor Baker explains, “I see my work as a materially grounded cultural study.” She hopes that it shows how “cultural politics really matter to flesh and blood people,” in order to affirm that “the analysis of culture has a place in studying the history of class relations.”

Ellen Baker
Professor Baker's work draws from the traditions of both women's history and gender studies. In “Salt of the Earth,” she focuses on how gender is an organizing principle in both women's and men's experiences of class consciousness. In particular, she looks at the ways in which “women’s experiences as household laborers can form the basis for a class consciousness that might be very different from that of their husbands.” She maintains that her work is as much about men and masculinity as it is about women and women's identities. “I’m part of a trend in feminist studies that moves away from considering only women; women's history is not only about women.” In her research, she attempts to “discern ways in which men understand and protect their claims to a certain kind of manhood.”

While pursuing graduate studies in Madison, Professor Baker not only wrote about labor actions but participated in them. She functioned as a delegate to the local federation from her union, the union of graduate students at Wisconsin—the oldest union in the country for graduate employees. A common impulse drives Professor Baker's academic work and her activism: an avid interest in “human rights and labor campaigns and in education.” As a graduate student, she took part in various educational initiatives outside of academia. She participated in the Women’s History Program’s outreach project, for which she developed presentations and slide shows about women’s history and then brought them to communities across the state—to women’s groups, to schools and to retirement homes. She also worked as a volunteer at a local radio station on a show about politics, “Third World View,” for which she conducted interviews and developed news programs. Although she believes that it is important and “healthy” to share her ideas with people outside of academia, she asserts that “I’m not someone who thinks that academia is not the real world.”

Professor Baker teaches courses that reflect her research interests. Last semester, she taught two undergraduate classes at Columbia: a survey course on twentieth century American labor history and a seminar on the American west in the twentieth century. She remarks that although courses on the American west “usually attract students who think they are going to study cowboys and Indians,” she was impressed by the sophistication of the students in her Columbia seminar, who “proved to be willing to explore other aspects of the west.” This term, Professor Baker is teaching a seminar on women in social movements, such as suffrage, anti-lynching, populist, new right and women’s liberation. Next spring, she plans to teach a general topics course on women in American history, which will be cross-listed with the Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

Professor Baker’s teaching and research interests are feminist and interdisciplinary. Although her background is in American history, she recognizes that globalization necessarily restructures her field. In her future projects, she contends, she will look at labor issues in a global context. “Broadly,” she says “I am interested in studying American imperialism in its different forms. I am particularly interested in studying the relationship between the movement of capital transnationally and the movement of labor transnationally.” In particular, she is interested in looking at “the ways in which people try to reconstruct their family economies when they have no stable home.” Her most pressing concern at the moment, however, is to develop her dissertation into a book.

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of study. It is a great pleasure to have worked with all of these exceptional undergraduates.

Finally, I would like to ask for your help with several administrative matters. In the next few weeks the Institute will be sending a letter to all associated faculty asking for courses that should be crosslisted with the Institute for next year. We are trying to make our course guides as accurate as possible, so please take the time to return those forms to us. Also, we are requesting feedback on the contents of this newsletter. A number of people have told us that our profiles of new faculty are especially welcome, as they alert our far-flung faculty and friends to the existence of vital new voices at Columbia. Others have particularly liked our profiles of significant women from Columbia’s past—such as Marjorie Hope Nicholson from English and Ruth Benedict from anthropology. Please let us know if there are issues, people, or events you would like to see us address. We welcome suggestions.
ship constitutes the last barrier to full equality. Her project investigates how gender informs the construction of the welfare state in America, and discusses the way in which legislation around unemployment insurance, fair labor standards, and the federal income tax has emerged from deeply rooted conceptions of social order.

Looking back on her professional achievements, Professor Kessler-Harris sees her work as a "seamless web." As time passes and the web widens, new threads and new patterns have appeared in it. "My very first work," she explains, "dealt with labor in a traditional institutional sense; then I focused on women who were workers; I've looked at conceptions of work and class and at how they were gendered. Now I'm focused on how those conceptions are affected by how gender has informed the development of social policy in the United States." Amidst these developments, she finds herself still grappling with many of the same issues that concerned her in the early seventies, after she completed her graduate work. She confesses, "You never really outgrow the questions of your childhood."

While conducting research for her dissertation, which focused on immigrant labor in America, she came across an interesting, then little known, writer, Anzia Yezierska. She became fascinated by Yezierska's novel, Bread Givers, which deals with women's search for autonomy and economic independence. "I fell in love with Yezierska, with her work," avows Professor Kessler-Harris, "but I didn't see its relationship to my dissertation." However, she did not forget Yezierska's work entirely. As a result of her efforts, Bread Givers was reprinted (with an introduction by Kessler-Harris) and has since become a commonly recognized classic of Lower East Side immigrant life. Only after she completed her Ph.D. did she perceive the links between Yezierska's work and her own. But that's not all she saw. "After finishing my dissertation," she recounts, "I looked up and finally saw the new women's movement all around me." She became involved almost immediately.

Personal and professional experience shaped the path of Professor Kessler-Harris's work. "In 1968, it was impossible to imagine that one could become a women's historian." At that time, women in the academy fought mostly for "the goodies of professional life." However, she soon found that it was impossible to work as a women in her profession "without thinking about women's history," in particular the history of women's work. This led her to recognize that she had written a dissertation about New York's early Jewish labor movement in which she had simply "left the women out. I realized I had been systematically discarding information about women, not recognizing their value." So, she went back to fill in the gaps: "The first serious articles I published were about women trade union organizers."

Since Professor Kessler-Harris completed her doctorate at Rutgers in 1968, her work has developed in ways that parallel shifts in the field of feminist studies. Her focus has veered away from the subject of women to thinking about women in the context of gender. She describes the change of focus in her work and in the discipline: "What began as a politically directed effort to uncover and unpack women's art, women's work and class and at how they were gendered. Now I'm focused on how those conceptions are affected by how gender has informed the development of social policy in the United States." Amidst these developments, she finds herself still grappling with many of the same issues that concerned her in the 1970's and 1980's. I actually disagree with that. I have argued that just as to understand workers you need to understand class; and just as to understand African Americans you need to understand racism, so in order to understand women you need to understand gender."

Since she entered the profession in 1968, activism has played a central role in Professor Kessler-Harris's life and academic practice. She has effectively combined trade union work with academic work. While at Hofstra University in the 1970's, she, together with Bert Silverman, set up an education program for the members of District 65, UAW. From 1974 to 1982 she helped to run the program, teaching in it as well. "It was a bachelor's degree program for working people. The union provided released time and paid tuition for their workers, who were released at 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon in order to go to school. Classes were held at the union headquarters." The program required close cooperation between the union and the university. This resulted in a constant struggle that left her feeling "somewhat cynical." "We fought many battles about what should be
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taught and how it should be taught, and in the process I learned something about academic freedom.”

Professor Kessler-Harris was for many years a member of the ACLU’s Academic Freedom Committee, and she maintained her membership throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s. Academic freedom remains a key concern for her. “One strength of the university is its ability to accommodate diverse perspectives, and these perspectives must be protected.” She believes that student activism is crucial to this process. “I think it is important for students to make their voices heard, to debate and to shape courses and curricula. Universities would be much poorer if students were not engaged in shaping their own studies.” She contends that one of the most powerful aspects of women’s studies is that it encourages precisely this kind of student participation.

According to Professor Kessler-Harris, a woman’s studies program should comprise diverse voices not only among its students but among its faculty as well. “A women’s and gender studies program should have men teaching in it; diversity should be embodied in its teaching, its extracurricular activities—speakers and conferences. If it does not do these things it will stop growing.” She reports that the Women’s Studies Program at Rutgers, which she directed from 1990 to 1995, was able to accommodate many views “in part because of its sprawling size.” Out of an undergraduate population of about 20,000, there are more than 200 women’s studies majors and minors at Rutgers. She looks forward to the relatively small size of Columbia’s Women’s and Gender Studies program, however, and to the challenge of incorporating diversity within its smaller population.

Professor Kessler-Harris anticipates teaching at Columbia with great excitement. In particular, she looks forward to teaching the undergraduate introduction to women’s studies course. “I thought it would be a great way for me to learn something about the Institute and to meet Columbia students.” In general, she enjoys teaching introductory courses in women’s studies; “I like to introduce beginning students to questions of gender.” She also looks forward to collaborating with other teachers on this course, which is team-taught: “When you teach with someone else, the class becomes a learning experience for you as well as for your students.” Professor Kessler-Harris is also eager to teach graduate students in women’s history. She hopes to find ways to combine her work with graduate students in the history department and at the Institute.

Senior Projects

Four seniors majoring in Women’s and Gender Studies are currently writing theses at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender under the direction of Professor Kathryn Gravdal, the Institute’s Undergraduate Director. The seniors participate in a seminar run by Professor Gravdal, who offers them guidance individually and provides a forum for group discussions of student work in class. The students also work with advisors in their fields of study, as well as a writing tutor at the Institute, Ellen Wurtzel, a graduate student in the History Department. The seniors’ projects, all of them strongly interdisciplinary, examine a wide range of subjects. They exemplify the kind of cutting edge research the Institute encourages. Recently, this group of students told Feminist News how they came to major in Women’s and Gender Studies, and how they are proceeding with their theses.

Margarita Suarez

Margarita Suarez has come to the Institute in a roundabout way. She graduated from Columbia College in 1989, majoring in Computer Science. In the last semester of her senior year, she was recruited by Columbia University to work as the lead programmer for UNIX systems development, and she remains in this position. “I make the CUNIX machines go,” she reports. “It’s a great job, and working for Columbia I get tuition exemption.” She has made good use of this perk. In fall of 1989, Suarez returned to school to get a Master’s in computer science. In 1995, soon after completing her M.A., she began to take classes again, but in a different field. Looking at the course bulletin, she noticed a new course was being offered at Barnard, “Introduction to Gay and Lesbian Studies,” taught by Professor Ann Pellegrini. Suarez notes, “When this course presented itself, I thought, ‘hey, that’s cool. When I was an undergraduate, they didn’t have such a course.’” However, she
soon discovered that to take a class at Barnard, she needed to be enrolled in a degree program, so she applied to the School of General Studies to begin a new Bachelor's degree, this time majoring in Women's and Gender Studies.

As a first-time undergraduate at Columbia College in the mid-eighties, Suarez became involved in student activism, and has remained a committed activist ever since. In the academic year 1986-87, she was Co-Chair of the Columbia Gay and Lesbian Alliance. Next, she helped to found a discussion group called “Women Oriented Women,” for lesbian, bisexual and questioning women, which met every week at the Institute. Suarez remembers, “The Institute was then kind of like it is now—very welcoming. You could just open the refrigerator and eat cheese.”

With great excitement, Suarez has returned to the Institute to pursue her major in Women’s and Gender Studies. She views her senior thesis, “Ay! Tomboy pala!”: Rethinking Lesbian Identity in a Philippine Context,” as the culmination of all her course work in her new major. “The project I’m working on now pulls together every single class that I’ve taken in women’s studies.” In this highly autobiographical essay, Suarez explores Filipino lesbian identity in a transnational context, specifically the cultural category “tomboy.” Suarez, who was born in the Philippines but raised in the U.S., explains, “The category ‘tomboy’ is not really the same as the American category ‘lesbian’. It is unique to Philippine culture. The name ‘Tomboy’ in the Philippines doesn’t refer to a stage you’re supposed to grow out of, as it does here. When someone says ‘Ay! Tomboy pala!’ they are recognizing you as a masculine woman. This recognition is a hailing or an interpellation, so you are being named as belonging to this category.” According to Suarez, the expression communicates “surprise, recognition, and interpellation.” In her essay, she re-thinks her own Filipino lesbian identity “as a modified process of ‘Ay! Tomboy pala!’” She explains, “I am surprised to discover the existence of such a category; I would like to recognize the ways in which “lesbians” belong to (or refuse) that category; and I wish to claim membership in that category, which, though ever present, has never been made available to me.” Suarez notes that her parents never mentioned the term “tomboy” to her; she first encountered it when she visited the Philippines as an adult.

Suarez’s project is firmly based in gender studies. “The appeal of gender studies to me is personal. It has a lot to do with my life.” Suarez distinguishes between women’s studies and gender studies, asserting that her interest really lies in the latter area: “Women’s studies is based on the assumption that we know what a woman is, and we know how she is being treated in the world by society, so we analyze this—it’s based on a positivist argument; whereas in gender studies you’re questioning gender roles, gender identifications.” Her senior essay allows her to explore her own lesbian and female identifications. Suarez’s project also allows her to explore the international aspect of her identity. To investigate global effects on lesbian identity in the Philippine context, she makes reference to the long history of colonialism in the Philippines. She says, “When you speak of a Filipino lesbian, you are implicitly making reference to an exchange of cultural values that takes place because of imperialism and
transnational migration.” In her essay, she attempts to discern ways in which U.S. cultural imperialism inflects Filipino lesbian identity formation. While working on her senior thesis, Suarez has become frustrated by “the paucity of available published material—especially theoretical material—about tomboys.” Much of her work is based on interviews she conducted with Filipino lesbians in the United States.

From Suarez’s perspective, her work serves a practical function. “I’m a very practical person,” she confesses, “and I wouldn’t be doing this work if it weren’t practical.” She says, “Taking these classes, I use a different mental muscle than I do at work. I think there’s a lot that I bring back to work with me.” Certainly, she has had a practical impact on the lives of a number of her office-mates. She has set a precedent for other employees at ASIS. With her encouragement, several of her co-workers have returned to school to complete BAs or higher degrees.

**Deborah Weiss**

Deborah Weiss is grateful for the support she has received for her thesis at the Institute. “Every component of the class is helpful,” she reports. “There are only four of us in the seminar, so we read and critique everything that everyone else writes. Whenever we have something due, we make copies for everybody, and read them. At our next class meeting, Kathryn and Ellen leave the room, and the four of us discuss our projects.” Weiss asserts that one of the most helpful aspects of the class is the commentary she receives from her peers during these discussions: “My three classmates are extremely helpful. Since our theses are entirely different, it is refreshing to read each other’s work. And the feedback they give me is extremely helpful. We all are respectful of each other.”

When Weiss first arrived at Columbia, she had no plans to major in women’s studies at all. Her interest in the field was peaked during her first semester, when she enrolled in “Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies.” After this, she continued to take courses through the Institute. One class greatly influenced her decision to major, “Introduction to Gay and Lesbian studies,” with Ann Pellegrini, a course that focuses on theory. “The class introduced me to a lot of new concepts. I tackled many difficult texts and was very challenged. When I came out of the course, it was clear that I had learned a lot; I had an entirely new perspective.”

In 1997, Weiss’s course of study became more focused after she worked for a summer at Planned Parenthood in Massachusetts. At the Information and Public Affairs Department, she conducted research to produce a fact sheet about violence against women’s health clinics. This work awakened her interest in public health, specifically, women’s reproductive health. Back at Columbia, she enrolled in a sociology class, “Women and Health,” taught by Professor Theresa Rogers. In this course, she was particularly fascinated by Kristin Luker’s book “Dubious Conceptions.” Luker argues that the factors of race and socioeconomic status together account for the high teen pregnancy rates in black communities in America. This book inspired Weiss’s senior thesis project. She describes her current work: “I’m looking at teen pregnancy in the United States, and I’m trying to account for the differences in pregnancy rates between black and white teens.” She is conducting what
sociologists term a “meta-analysis,” in which she looks at a set of studies that have examined different variables to try to account for this difference. “I explain these studies, weigh their merits, and look at the problems in them.”

Weiss remembers, “When I first read Luker, I bought all of her argument.” This changed when she began to work with her advisor, Professor Debra Kalmuss, at the School of Public Health’s Center for Population and Family Health. Professor Kalmuss, who, Weiss says, “has gone well above and beyond the call of duty as an advisor,” helped Weiss develop a critical position of her own. “She took my project in a new direction by introducing me to a range of recent studies.” One group of theorists, including Luker, argue that the variable of race and the variable of socioeconomic status (S.E.S.) are linked and that together these variables explain the difference in teen pregnancy rates. Weiss states, “I set that down as the foundation, and then argue that this theory isn’t enough. This equation of race and S.E.S. does not account for everything.” Therefore, Weiss considers other paradigms, such as social influence models, which look at the impact of values and norms within communities. Yet after extensive reading and analysis of data, she has found that no model alone accounts for the difference in pregnancy rates. “My conclusion in the end is that S.E.S is operating, but there are other variables. You can’t lay out a linear equation because there are many interlinked factors, influencing each other forwards and backwards.”

In her conclusions, Weiss examines the policy implications of her findings. She asks, “What do we do with this information? How can we make use of it to bring about change?” To address these questions, she discusses two types of policies, ameliorative and preventative. For example, Weiss discusses the research of Frank Furstenberg, who found that when black teens attend segregated schools, their rates of sexual activity and pregnancy are a lot higher. However, if the teens are bussed to integrated schools, their rates of pregnancy and sexual activity drop. Weiss asserts, “This shows that social influence factors can be changed. Furstenberg proves that values and norms can be changed with the effect of lowering pregnancy rates. So that’s where policy makers need to focus their attention. Of course, they also must work to improve social services and education.”

Weiss’s research combines many of her interests and points toward what she hopes will be her future work. Ultimately, she would like to work in the field of public health, specifically women’s reproductive health. Although she plans eventually to pursue graduate studies in this field, perhaps in health management policy, after she graduates from Columbia College she would like to work for a few years. She says, “What I would most like is to get a job at Planned Parenthood.”

**Abigail Zitin**

When Abigail Zitin arrived at Columbia College from Massachusetts, she was most excited about studying the Core curriculum. “Women’s and gender studies certainly was not something I expected to be doing,” she remembers. “But what frustrated me when I got here was that the Core left me little time for anything else. Also, I was afraid that if I specialized in anything, I’d lose my grounding in general humanities, in all those different disciplines, so the idea of doing something interdisciplinary became very appealing to me.” Consequently, when her Literature Humanities Professor, David Levine, encouraged her to pursue interdisciplinary studies at the Institute, she took his advice.

For many reasons, Zitin is pleased with her choice of major. The major, she says, “is a perfect counterpoint to the Core.” “They work very nicely with each other and against each other, in part because they both require you to use different disciplinary methods to get to a broader narrative of culture.” Countering commonplace arguments against the Core, she asserts, “What people tend to ignore when they criticize the core is that young faculty tend to teach it, so that it’s more common than its critics acknowledge to have young, progressive, theoretically current people teaching these texts.” She counts among these Professor Levine, who now functions as her thesis advisor.

Her major has also given her the opportunity to select choice classes in various departments. She can dip into the English Department and take only the classes that most interest her. One of these was Jean Howard’s Shakespeare survey. This class, she reports, “exemplifies how criticism and theory and feminism should and can inflect the study of literature. It was a Shakespeare survey course but
we were doing criticism every step of the way. I wish the English department was more like that in general.”

Zitin enjoys the challenge of explaining her studies to others: “One of the great things about being in women’s studies is having constantly to account for the fact that I’m here. When you say you’re an English major, people ask, ‘What are you going to do with that?’ But when you say you’re a woman’s studies major, people say ‘What is that?’ Answering that question has been an education in and of itself.”

Furthermore, answering this question has offered her practice for responding to questions about her current research. She explains, “I’m writing on mentoring relationships between male teachers and female students, and how these relationships work with regard to power and gender and sex.” She continues, “I don’t want to claim that I’m doing something dangerous, but the idea that there is an erotic investment in the teacher-student relationship is kind of taboo in pedagogical circles.” The faculty at the Institute, however, has offered her “an amazing amount of support.”

Zitin’s approach is based in queer theory. She explains, “I look at how these relationships are structured by compulsory heterosexuality. Especially in the era of sexual harassment, the internal workings of these relationships are structured by the discourses of suspicion. Heterosexuality infects everyone’s view of such relationships to the degree that the relationship is always in response to such suspicions.” To create a theoretical framework for her paper, she draws from a range of works: “I’m trying to appropriate as much material as I can from the theory that I’ve read in my classes.”

Her topic emerged from questions raised by personal experience. “This topic is something that has preoccupied me on a personal level for a very long time. I wondered why I had chosen my mentors—who have been male—or why those mentors had chosen me. What were the particularities and peculiarities of these relationships?” Above all, she is interested in the qualities that characterize mentoring relationships between female students and male teachers. “My sense has always been that these relationships are more thoroughly policed and mannered than mentoring relationships between women.” In her thesis, Zitin considers Adrienne Rich’s call for more women mentors. “What Rich keeps calling for is a nurturing relationship that seems to nullify the power differential that’s inherent in student-teacher relationships, and I don’t buy that as a demand. I think it’s great if women are mentoring women, but I don’t think it’s necessary to replicate a maternal nurturing bond. There’s an educating function to that power difference. There’s a stringency to that demand that the student be smart and the teacher be a teacher. It’s tremendously productive but unfortunately sometimes eclipsed and silenced by discourses of suspicion that circulate around it.”

As she proceeds with her research, she has experienced some frustration. First of all, she has found few sources on the topic. “I kept trying to find this topic addressed in a book, so I could do a reading of the book,” but she has found little material. One source has been Jane Gallop’s book—and the debates surrounding it. Gallop, accused of sexual harassment by her students, is, Zitin surmises, “a
tricky case. I don’t want to valorize her or her situation. I think she lacks the perspective to be able to think through her own actions. On the other hand she is the only person who’s talking about this, and only by default.” Gallop raises the issues by acting out, by provoking. And the critics have come down hard on her. Zitin explains, “The kind of venom in the responses to her was excessive because it is threatening to talk about eroticism and pedagogy in the same sentence; it puts people on edge. This is why I’ve inspired a few raised eyebrows, not from professors but from my peers.”

Zitin’s work as a teacher has informed her thesis work. Since she began her studies at Columbia, she has returned repeatedly to her high school, the Waring School, to teach theater. After she graduates from Columbia College, she plans to remain in New York City and to pursue one of her callings—writing. “I interned at the Voice last fall and ended up writing a couple of book reviews for them in the spring.” She hazards that she will return to school soon. “I can’t see myself out of school for very long. I thrive on relationships with teachers and with students. So I’ll be back.”

Sarah Weiss

Sarah Weiss developed an avid interest in women’s issues when she was still in high school. “When I left Yeshiva University High School for Girls after completing tenth grade, I knew that in college I would major in women’s studies.” At the time she began her studies as a freshman at Yeshiva, an Orthodox Jewish institution, she started to question the particulars of Jewish religious practice.

specifically those laws that she felt discriminated against women. “I came to one of my teachers and started to ask questions—about God and about my discomfort with certain laws and practices. Her only concern about me was the length of my skirt. It was in the middle of my knee, and it needed to cover my knee. I was infuriated; I just blew up.” Soon after this incident, Weiss transferred to the small, secular Hewitt School: “I entered the Hewitt world, the real world, as I call it, the world where there are lots of different cultures.” At Hewitt, Weiss recalls, “It was not necessarily the courses I took that turned me towards women’s studies, but rather the way in which I was treated.” She asserts, “For the first time, I was treated as an adult, as an equal. I felt that I had a say in my future.” Hewitt gave Weiss the confidence to continue to live as an Orthodox Jew while questioning many of the religion’s premises, something she has continued to do throughout her college career.

During Weiss’s first year at Columbia, a jarring experience further focused her personal and academic interest on women’s issues. One of her close friends was the victim of a date rape and became pregnant. Weiss supported her friend through an abortion and during a protracted period of emotional healing. For Weiss, one of the most disturbing aspects of this experience was that “The law would not protect my friend. There was no justice for her.” During this period, the only solace Weiss found was in the company of women. She discovered that “where women are organized they are supported,” and she decided to learn as much as she could about women’s organizations and women’s rights. Throughout this exploration, Weiss was touched by women’s solidarity: “Beyond any organization, there’s a camaraderie that women have. I wanted to learn more about orga-
nizations and ideas that brought women together.

Last summer, Weiss took a course called “Women and Human Rights,” at The School of International and Public Affairs, with Professor Arati Rao. In the class, she studied key human rights documents such as The International Declaration of Human Rights, a section of the International Bill of Rights, ratified by the United Nation in 1948. This course eventually led her to her thesis topic and to work in the field of human rights. She recounts, “After taking this course, I decided that human rights, particularly women’s rights, are my greatest concern. I took the course and then immediately I got a job working for the Lawyer’s Committee for Human Rights.” Weiss contends, “Before taking this class, I had never really found my niche. I had never thought about human rights before. It was never a part of my language. The concept has changed my way of seeing.” This new language provides her with the tools to rethink issues she had grappled with since she was a child.

Weiss’s thesis, “God’s Own Lightening: Niddah and Human Rights,” applies the secular standards of human rights discourse to religious questions that have concerned her for much of her life. Weiss explains her subject—the Niddah laws: “Within religious Judaism, Niddah is a set of laws that married women must follow when they are menstruating.” In her essay, Weiss asserts that the laws are based on problematic conceptions of purity and impurity, which she contends are “isolating and discriminatory.” One of the central concerns of her thesis is the definition of these terms.

Weiss explains an important aspect of the law. “The first law is that the woman cannot have marital relations with her husband during her menstrual period, and for seven waiting days afterwards.” This part of the law has a set of corollaries, what the Jewish tradition terms “fences” around the law. To ensure the observance of the Niddah laws, Jewish law takes a further step by deeming the menstruating woman as well as anything she touches impure. “She cannot even share a spoon with her husband.”

To support her argument that the Niddah laws are discriminatory, Weiss cites as evidence articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. “I make a comparison with genital mutilation, which is also based in the idea of impurity and purity.” Weiss claims that while genital mutilation mutilates the body, Niddah laws mutilate the psyche. “The laws of Niddah, because they isolate women, will have everlasting effects on the way women perceive themselves. Women are isolated because of the way they are viewed by those around them, especially by their husbands. Also, the idea that their God would deem them impure and unholy must be devastating.”

In writing her thesis, Weiss has come to the conclusion that questions having to do with religion and human rights are complex and have no easy answers. “How can you prohibit a practice that is part of someone’s belief system? Who makes the guidelines?” Her essay raises many questions but draws few conclusions. She says, “My only firm conclusion is that Niddah is discriminatory, according to the parameters set up by the declaration.”

Weiss has encountered obstacles in her research. “What I have found is that male rabbis don’t want to talk with me about this. They send me to female rabbis.” Moreover, she has trouble reconciling her findings with her own religious beliefs. “My Jewish day school experience from kindergarten to eighth grade was wonderful. I first learned the Niddah laws with my most beloved rabbi. This is what is difficult for me. Addressing this topic, I don’t want to be disrespectful in any way. I have great respect for my religion and for the rabbi who taught me these laws. Through the work on this project, I have looked closely at the Talmud. I questioned whether or not to include some of my findings out of respect.” She concludes, “I hope that I’ve brought this emotional background into the making of my thesis.”

Weiss is committed to pursuing human rights work after she graduates from Columbia. “It is my calling,” she states. Currently, Weiss continues to pursue her calling by working for The Reebok Award Winners Organization. This organization gives awards to young people who are working in the field of human rights. “What I do is to help them to continue in their work, by providing them with whatever equipment they need. For instance, I try to find businesses that will donate computers for those who need computers.” Although she had investigated graduate programs in human rights, she has decided to work in her field of interest before continuing her formal education.
“Caroline Bynum’s work at Columbia has been extraordinary. She has produced scholarship of the highest order and has also generously served as mentor for many students and members of the faculty,” Professor Bynum, who came to Columbia from the University of Washington in 1988, teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in cultural and religious history, focusing mostly on the late antique and medieval periods. In 1997, Columbia awarded her the Presidential Award for Outstanding Teaching.

Professor Bynum’s new appointment frees her to devote more time both to scholarship and to teaching. “The main thing it does is move you out of your department,” she comments. “You thus become responsible to the Provost, Jonathan R. Cole, who is the Dean of Faculties for your teaching and research.” This status leaves her free to teach in any Columbia department. While she does not plan to shift gears dramatically, she does plan to move toward more interdisciplinary teaching. “I might use more art historical and literary materials.” She hopes to make this change while at the same time continuing to teach classes in history. “I have spent a lot of time building up the Medieval Program and I would not want to abandon it.”

The new position will grant Professor Bynum more time to conduct her own research. “By moving out of a particular department, one gets some release from departmental obligations.” Currently, she is beginning a new project. “I am working on ideas of metamorphosis, focusing on the period around 1200. I am interested in the ways in which metamorphosis was an important image for people addressing various sorts of questions about identity at a time when people were increasingly fascinated by the possibility of physical transformation.” At this historical moment, the first accounts since antiquity of vampires, werewolves, and alchemical metamorphoses were produced. “I’m looking at metamorphosis in relationship to what was going on in the church and in society. It was a time of great instability.” Professor Bynum intends to demonstrate precisely how the social foment of the period fostered this fascination with processes of transformation.

Professor Bynum is also intrigued by transformations taking place closer to home. She is greatly honored to be the first woman University Professor at Columbia, and she views her appointment as part of a new trend that she applauds. “In the ten years I’ve been at Columbia, I’ve noticed that high prestige positions are increasingly open to women and populated by women; recently, the Trilling lecture and the Tannenbaum lecture have been given by women. It is also true that there are more tenured women here than there were even a few years ago.” This visibility provides role models for other women. Professor Bynum sees this shift in the climate for women at Columbia manifest in many ways; scholars have been hired whose work is explicitly feminist; IRWAG has grown and achieved great success; and there is ever more feminist work being done by students and faculty. She comments that overall, “of the Ivy League institutions, Columbia is the most open to women.”

Professor Bynum notes that her own department has included many strong female scholars ever since she arrived at Columbia. “There are strong women representing every area of history.” This was not the case at Harvard, when she joined the faculty as a new Ph.D. in the late 1960s. At that time, “there were six hundred members of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, twelve of whom were women—all of those in entry level positions. There wasn’t even a woman in the Chair endowed for women.” At Harvard, she reports, “I had wonderful students, but the isolation was extreme. I was the only woman in the History Department; and when I moved to the Divinity School, I was the only woman on the faculty there.” Also, the number of female students was kept low by stringent admissions criteria. The difference between Harvard and the University of Washington, where there were many women on the faculty and in the student body, was dramatic.

Looking back on her career, Professor Bynum asserts, “There have been deep structural changes in these institutions during my lifetime. I was still a bit of a pioneer, but the changes came.” Moreover, she played a leading role in helping to make these changes happen. At Harvard, she set up a pressure group to push the university to change its policies dealing with women. “The administration responded by setting up a committee. We made recommendations, none of which were adopted at the time. However, we published a report that served as a model for...”
Courses, Spring 1999

**Graduate**

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*Bynum, continued from page 13*

reform at other institutions, many of which made the changes we suggested for Harvard long before Harvard did. In fact, Harvard is still working on implementing some of the reforms we suggested over 25 years ago.” Remarking that her achievements would not have been possible a generation earlier, she recounts, “My mother got a Ph.D. in philosophy in the thirties during the Depression, and the story of her life is very different from the story of mine. She taught for a little while, and then, when she had children, she dropped out for twenty years. It is hard for me to imagine the difficulties she encountered.”

Speaking of the academy, Professor Bynum contends that “while the battles were clear in the early days, the battles now are more ambiguous and more complicated.” Looking toward the future, she is most concerned by a process she terms “speed up.” “Speed up,” she asserts, is “too much pressure to produce too many words too fast.” She notes that “speed up” is not particularly a gender issue, but it is often a generational issue. “There is a huge generational divide because expectations within institutions have changed. I would not have gotten tenure when I did according to today’s standards. At that time, I hadn’t published enough.” She continues, “There’s hardly any senior faculty member today who would have been tenured judged by these standards. And

*Bynum, continued on page 16*
IRWAG Launches New Lecture Series: Feminist Interventions

This fall the Institute for Research on Women and Gender launched a new lecture series, Feminist Interventions: Works in Progress. The series focuses on feminist scholarship currently being undertaken by members of the Columbia faculty. Professor Jean Howard, Director of IRWAG, comments, “In this inaugural year of the series, we wanted to focus on the enormous diversity of feminist talent on our campus.” Moreover, the series facilitates exchanges amongst faculty members who rarely have the opportunity to share their work with each other. Professor Howard explains, “Often, we are preoccupied with institutional business and don’t have the opportunity to hear about the work of our fellow scholars. With this series, we are trying to create a forum in which to explore the intellectual life that we share as opposed to the university business that we must do.” About the possibility of continuing the series, Professor Howard comments, “If the series is successful, we may well repeat it in the future, possibly including speakers from outside of Columbia.”

The lectures represent a broad range of projects from disparate fields. In the fall term, Professor Dorothea von Mucke, from the Department of Germanic Languages, initiated the series with her talk “The Self Before Psychology: Some Remarks on Pietist Confessional Discourse.” Other talks were by Rosalind Morris, from the Department of Anthropology, who presented “Writing: Love, Letters and Prostitution in Thailand,” and Professor Carol Sanger, from the School of Law, who presented “Separating from Children.” Three more lectures are scheduled to take place this spring.

- **February 1**  Gayatri Spivak, Department of English and Comparative Literature: “Feminism without Frontiers”

- **March 1**  Marcia Wright, Department of History: Women of Higher Status and Political Authority: from African to World Historical Reflections”

- **April 5**  Zita Nunes, Department of English and Comparative Literature: “Reparations”

The lectures are open to both undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and the university community at large. They are also open to the public. Talks will be held at 8 P.M. in Room 142 Uris. For more information, please call the Institute for Research on Women and Gender (854-3277).

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**Workshop on Feminist Pedagogy**

The Workshop in Feminist Pedagogy (G8001y) will be offered in the spring semester. It will be taught by Professor Elizabeth Castelli of the Department of Religion (Barnard College) and Professor Zita Nunes of the Department of English. Those interested in participating should call the Gender Institute (212-54-3277) for more information.

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**Candidates for the Senior Search in Women’s Studies and Anthropology** will be coming to campus early in the semester. Call the Institute on Research for Women and Gender for lecture dates and times.
with such pressures, many of us would not have produced the slowly gestating works of our early careers.” Now everyone is subjected to “speed up” pressures. “Nobody is mentoring anyone because we’re all stretched to the limit. The older generations of faculty don’t have time to take care of the younger generations.”

Furthermore, Professor Bynum worries, “If this ‘speed up’ continues, who will teach our students? Who will have the time?” She asks, “if ‘speed up’ is the enemy, how can we fight it?” One way she attempts to counter the effects of “speed up” pressures is to pay lots of attention to her students. “I sit in my office and I have undergraduates who come in ostensibly to talk about a paper topic but end up talking about God, or about what they’re going to do with their lives, or about whether or not science is true. There has to be a time in the educational process for that to happen. When one’s working with undergraduates, there should be time for the big questions to come up. Otherwise what’s a liberal arts education for? We might as well all be in apprenticeships learning to plane wood.”

At IRWAG, Professor Bynum has provided crucial support as a mentor for numerous students. She has been involved with the Institute since she first came to Columbia, participating in workshops and colloquia and functioning as an advisor for undergraduates and graduates. For many years, she has served on the Institute’s Executive Committee. Most of the classes she teaches fall under the rubric of the Institute. The survey courses she teaches always include a plethora of woman-authored texts. “When they call me from the Institute each semester and ask if I’m teaching anything on women, I always say, ‘yes, and it’s called Medieval Religion or ‘yes, and it’s called Medieval History.’” She notes that her position as University Professor will facilitate her work with students at the Institute, as it will enable her to focus more on interdepartmental and interdisciplinary work.