Postcard from Sri Lanka
by Neloufer de Mel

Neloufer de Mel

A prominent feminist voice in Sri Lanka today, Neloufer de Mel is Director of Studies in the Faculty of Arts and a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Colombo. She spent three weeks in residence at the CSGS in October 2004 under the auspices of the International Visitors Program of the Office of the Vice Provost.

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Being of an island, the sea is in my blood. But the day after Christmas, when the Tsunami waves struck – killing an estimated 40,000 people in Sri Lanka alone – my relationship to the sea changed, as did it for countless others living near the Indian Ocean. There is something about natural disasters that goes deep into the heart of human anxiety. They evoke fear and a sense of helplessness against the might of nature. This story of struggle has repeatedly circuclated as a classic theme in films, novels and plays, and lent itself to highlighting both the fragility of the human condition and the value of the human spirit as it heroically survives against countless odds and stands up in the face of death, despair and loss of meaning. The Tsunami waves that crashed onto our shores causing so much tragedy and devastation in their wake taught us many lessons that day.

For one: natural disasters never stay “natural” for long. Our reactions to them are not neutral but mediated through various cultural and ideological viewpoints as we keep seeking meaning for what has happened. Our relationship to the sea changed on that fateful morning. For some of us religion either lost meaning or became “natural” for long. Our reactions to them are not neutral but mediated through various cultural and ideological viewpoints as we keep seeking meaning for what has happened. Our relationship to the sea changed on that fateful morning. For some of us religion either lost meaning or became eight decades ago. For others religion endured. For still others there was a sense of helplessness.

Even as we politicized the natural disaster, we naturalized a political disaster of our own making. The shock of so much death and devastation caused by the waves was truly overwhelming. But if the Tsunami engulfed 40,000 lives in two hours, over the course of the twenty-year ethnic war in Sri Lanka there was willful killing of 65,000 people. The war also saw entire villages and communities displaced and affected by shellings and bombing raids; people were traumatized through the sudden loss of loved ones, livelihoods and homes. The Tsunami waves, however, have kept this story of the war at bay.

To me this reflects the extent to which Sri Lankan society has become militarized in a manner that has made most of us, to a lesser or greater degree, accept war as inevitable and militaristic solutions to conflict as legitimate; has made us indifferent to the failures of peace efforts; has made us cynical about the outcome of the war and its aftermath. This is what enables us, even as I write, to marginalize the 65,000 deaths and center the 40-odd thousand without paying attention to how every one of these deaths, whether due to war or the waves, is very special, is particular, is a loss to our humanity. This is what enabled the State to mark the one month’s remembrance and memorialize the Tsunami tragedy at 9:30 in the morning (when the waves struck Hambantota in the Sinhala south) and not 8:45 a.m. (when they crashed into the Tamil areas of Mullaitivu). This is what inspires so many people to donate money, supplies and services to the Tsunami affected, when war victims have not elicited such a response for a number of years. This is what enables politicians and officials to say that the Tsunami has been “a Maha Vipatha,” a Great Tragedy, as they did at the 31st December 2004 memorial meeting, and the “largest ever calamity we have faced,” as a senior government official did recently.

The sea is still on my mind. As I look at its emerald green or blue-grey water and sniff its cooling breezes in the tropical humidity and sunshine, I wonder what else it has in store.
The news in my last column (Newsletter, Spring 2004) about the prospect of a new “broadband” department at NYU – including Gender and Sexuality Studies (GSS) along with Africana Studies, American Studies, Asian/Pacific American Studies, Latino Studies, and Metropolitan Studies – has provoked many questions. Not all of them can be answered at the present moment, but here are some provisional comments and an update on the state of the almost-union. At this writing, we hope to be formally constituted as a department by September 2005.

What’s the name of the proposed department?

Recalling Lana Turner in a 60s melodrama, we had become known as Department X. After nearly two years of deliberations, we finally decided on Department of Social and Cultural Analysis – its elements are recognizable without referring to an already established field of study, and it thus gestures toward our intellectual and pedagogical innovativeness.

What is the intellectual rationale? Why should Gender & Sexuality Studies be part of it?

All the existing programs involved have thrived in large part because of their distinctive relationships to academic fields such as African American studies, ethnic studies, and women’s studies. Emerging from the social movements of the 1960s, particularly in the U.S., programs in these areas have spent decades on the problematics of racial identities, ethnic identities, and gender identities. At the same time, there has been a growing awareness of the mutually constitutive nature of these sociocultural formations and, moreover, the geographical and material conditions of their emergence. To an ever increasing degree, these conditions have implicated urban life in general – and the global megacity of New York in particular – including the city’s position amid transnational flows and relations. Localist and identitarian social movements have accordingly evolved, and so, we feel, must their academic counterparts, extending beyond the limits of their current institutional structures.

At NYU, this evolution necessitates that the six programs mentioned above, including GSS, cluster together into a single department with an integrated curriculum. The department’s location at the interstices of the humanities and social sciences (with connections to some of the sciences as well as other NYU schools) allows for the development of interdisciplinary methodologies, distinguishes its capacities for intellectual and curricular growth from those of disciplinarily defined departments, and creates a space in which truly new paradigms can emerge and develop.

So isn’t this just a warmed-over version of cultural studies? Even if it isn’t, why is it better than what exists now? As the result of the innovations of ethnic studies and women’s studies, numerous departments in the Faculty of Arts and Science at NYU have over the years revised their curricula and added new faculty.

Yes, to a large extent the proposed new department will deal with the intellectual issues and problems rendered salient within cultural studies, but we will pursue them with a greater degree of analytical rigor – at least in part because of our institutional location between the humanities and social sciences, and because of our intended focus on the particular problems of interdisciplinarity itself.

The enlargement and elaboration of various departments at NYU over the years is a result to be praised, and yet truly new paradigms, moving beyond ethnic studies, area studies, and gender studies, will not emerge from the disciplines. The proposed department will be the locus in which new paradigms can emerge and flourish. One key reason for this is that the proposed department will be able to make faculty appointments on its own (rather than joint appointments with established disciplinary departments, which is currently required of the programs).

From an administrative standpoint, there will be more coordination and less redundancy when the six programs are working directly with each other under one departmental name and roof to deliver an integrated curriculum. Many of us already collaborate with each other quite closely on teaching and research, and this proposal will give us the institutional framework in which to work more effectively.

Since under this plan the six academic programs will still exist – students will still be able to major in Gender & Sexuality Studies, for example – what will this “integrated curriculum” look like?

There will be an option for students to do a new integrated major in SCA, but yes, students will also have the choice to major (or minor) in GSS or any of the other 5 constituent programs. We have tried to maintain a level of integrity in the programs while creating a larger project that is greater than the sum of its parts. Thus all students in the department would have to take a common set of required core courses that would be departmental in nature as well as a set of courses that would be specified by the requirements of their chosen major program. We envision that the common courses would include Topics in SCA, Methods in SCA, and a departmental Senior Research Seminar, in addition to an internship and other requirements. Because the introductory Topics and Methods courses would be fully integrative and interdisciplinary, we intend that they be taught.

Would there be a course specifically in methods of researching Gender and Sexuality Studies (as well as a course on methods for each of the other programs)?

This raises a more general question about whether there are research methods specific to GSS, or whether interdisciplinary research methods are transferable from field to field. We have not come to agreement on this question, but my own view is that a course specific to the research needs of GSS students may well be needed. Since each field has its own unique history and its own archives, not only the content but also the very formulation of the questions and the modes of answering them will be inflected by that uniqueness. Meanwhile, in our proposed curriculum we intend to retain gateway courses to the majors (so that GSS majors, for example, would take an intermediate-level course called Approaches to GSS).

The largest worry, of course, is that Gender and Sexuality Studies will get lost in this broader departmental formation. The current atmosphere in the Bush administration as well as in higher education exacerbates this worry: at this moment, for example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics is planning to suspend its collection of data on women employees; meanwhile, the concept of “diversity” is commonly construed to refer only to ethnic and racial diversity. What’s to say that this new Department of Social and Cultural Analysis is not a way of disappearing gender and sexuality? It’s instructive to note that other programs in the department worry about being lost or marginalized, too, and everyone is aware of the risks. We could frame this as a question about administering resources: who gets the money, when, and how do we decide? I think the department will need to keep our intellectual rationale in mind at all times and appeal to a sense of the overall project – indeed, the greater good – as we make decisions about all kinds of resource allocations.

You mentioned operating “under one roof.” Where will the new department be located?

We recently learned that Biosphere 2 is for sale, so we’d like to add that to the list of potential spaces . . . More seriously: we have been apprised of several possibilities in the Washington Square campus area. Let’s all stay tuned.

Council on Contemporary Families at the CSGS

by Judith Stacey

Under the auspices of CSGS, NYU hosted the 2004 annual national conference of the Council on Contemporary Families (CCF) last May. Founded in 1996, CCF is a national, non-profit organization of family scholars, clinicians, and leaders committed to raising the caliber of national conversations about the character, strengths, needs, and challenges of diverse forms of contemporary families. Concerned that, because of the politics of “family values” of the past several decades, substantial distortions and misrepresentations of research on family change have been disseminated, CCF works to promote more sensitive and contextualized understandings of social, legal, economic, cultural, and psychological family matters in the media, among policy makers, and community organizations.

Last spring’s CCF conference, entitled “Is the U.S. in the Vanguard or the Rearguard of International Family Transformation?”, was the first to question directly the U.S.-centric discourse on family issues. An international group of participants was asked to place American family politics in a global perspective and to consider the effect of American policies on family and sexual lives elsewhere in the world. Scholars, journalists, and activists from Latin America, Australia, Europe, South Africa, and Canada as well as the U.S. participated on panels that debated such matters as the achievements of international lesbian family struggles, the place of fathers in welfare policy, the gender effects of international family leave policies, and the global effects of U.S. promotion of sexual abstinence on AIDS and reproductive politics. The Friday evening event featured a public dialog between Frances Kissling, Director of Catholics for Free Choice, and Ulla Sandbaek, then the Danish Parliament Member of the European Union, on the question “Is Sexual Abstinence a Family Value? How U.S. family and reproductive policies affect families around the world.”

Panelists selected to represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences presented brief summaries of their views before engaging in lively, and occasionally sharp, debates. For example, Australian sociologist and international AIDS researcher Gary Dowsett debated the appropriate gender strategies of AIDS prevention work with Jill Lewis, Coordinator of the Prevention, Youth and Gender Project of the Nordic Institute. Likewise, feminist economist Barbara Bergmann debated the impact on women of paid family leave policies that were supported by Professors Anya Bernstein of Harvard and Janet Gornick of CUNY. However, there was little disagreement over the proper answer to the rhetorical question in the conference theme. Contemporary U.S. family discourse and politics, which encompasses both vanguard and rearguard elements, is among the most polarized, polarizing, and consequential in the world. The 2004 election serves as a potent reminder of this verdict.

Judith Stacey, GSS and Sociology Professor, and 2004 CCF Conference Chair
Comings and Goings at CSGS

Rabab Abdulhadi completed three years as CSGS Assistant Professor/Faculty Fellow (2001-04), and in fall 2004 joined the faculty of the University of Michigan at Dearborn as Director of the Center for Arab American Studies and Associate Professor of Sociology. She is also part of the Fulbright New Century Scholars Program this year.

Robert Campbell became the new CSGS Program Administrator in September 2004. A native of Kentucky with long roots in Brooklyn, he oversees the day-to-day operations of the Center, doing everything from maintaining the budget and managing the listserve to coordinating the Center’s many events.

After five years as CSGS Administrative Aide, Bernadine Cidranes recently left to become Administrator at the NYU College of Dentistry Department of Orthodontics. Her position has been taken up by California native and theatre stage manager Melanie Montes, who helps students make their way through the complicated bureaucratic processes of the College.

CSGS founder and director Carolyn Dinshaw has been Director of Undergraduate Studies for the Gender and Sexuality Studies Program this academic year. She taught a graduate seminar on Medieval Women’s Writing in spring 2004 and the undergraduate Queer Cultures course this past fall. She is founding co-editor of GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, a quarterly journal housed at the Center and published by Duke University Press, and reads medieval mystical texts in her spare time.

American Studies, History, and Gender and Sexuality Studies professor Lisa Duggan became CSGS Associate Director in fall 2004. She has become a part of the public debates around gay marriage with an influential article in The Nation (“Holy Matrimony,” 15 March 2004). Professor Duggan taught the undergraduate course “Intersections: Race, Gender and Sex in US History” this past fall and is teaching “Studying Gender, Studying Sexuality” this spring. Lynne Haney, former CSGS Associate Director, is a Fullbright New Century Scholar and on leave this year.

For the spring 2005 semester, Lerna Ekmeckicglu (Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Department and History Department joint program) is Teaching Assistant for “Gender and Development in South Asia.” Lerna is interested in the intersections between feminism and nationalism, gender and nation; her dissertation is on the Armenian, Greek and Turkish women’s movements of early 20th-century Istanbul.

Kerwin Kaye (American Studies Program) is Teaching Assistant for “Studying Gender, Studying Sexuality” this spring. Kerwin’s essay “Male Prostitution in the Twentieth Century” was selected by the journal of Homosociality as the “Best of Volume” for 2003.

Orly Lubin, from the Department of Comparative Literature and the Women Studies Program at Tel Aviv University, served as an adjunct in the Gender and Sexuality Studies Program during the fall, teaching “Gender, Nation and the Colonial Condition.” In addition, Tey Meadow, a graduate student in the NYU Department of Sociology, taught the fall undergraduate course, “Transgender: Histories, Identities and Politics.”

Ricardo Montez is currently a doctoral student in the Department of Performance Studies at NYU, finishing up a dissertation on New York artist Keith Haring. He is Managing Editor of GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies.

Program Administrator Ann Neumann left CSGS last spring to become the Administrator for the NYU Religious Studies Program. Her CSGS position was temporarily occupied by two able NYU graduate students, Stephanie Byrd (working on a Sociology dissertation on how young adults reconcile autonomy and commitment: “The Changing Shape of Commitment: Contradictions and Choices Among a New Generation of Young Adults”) and Esra Selen (whose Performance Studies dissertation, “The Work of Sacrifice: Gender Performativity, Modernity, and Islam in Contemporary Turkish Performance [1960-2004],” examines the contested role of “woman” through the lens of sacrifice).

Alyssa Nitchun joined the CSGS staff as a work-study student in September 2004. She is a graduate student in the Draper program here at NYU as well as a DJ at a downtown nightclub. Alyssa and undergraduate work-study student Petra Frank provide invaluable office support and research assistance.

Khary Polk (American Studies Program) and Olga Burakov (English Department) were Teaching Assistants for “Introduction to Gender and Sexuality” in fall 2004. Olga’s dissertation examines deviant speech acts – specifically lying – and the construction of masculinity in late medieval romances. Khary has a short story coming out this spring in Cortas, the journal of the AIDS Project Los Angeles; he is currently doing research on military American identities and transnationalism.

Svati P. Shah came to the CSGS as Assistant Professor/Faculty Fellow in fall 2004 from Columbia University’s interdisciplinary program in Anthropology and Public Health. In addition to core courses in the Gender and Sexuality Studies major, she is teaching a seminar on gender and development in South Asia this year. Professor Shah’s research focuses on migrant labor and sex work in Mumbai in a large context of liberalization, nationalism, and a rapidly changing political economy.

Judith Stacey, Professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies and Sociology, has just been selected to be a Visiting Scholar next year at the Russell Sage Foundation (New York) to work on her book, tentatively entitled The Chosen Families of Men: Gay Male Intimacy and Kinship in a Global Metropolis. This semester she is teaching the Gender and Sexuality Studies Senior Seminar.
Hughes later observed, this persecution of goals were clearly on the horizon: as Holly the grants' denial, but broader sociopolitical and sexual politics and contents of their four performance artists. The gender a chronological account of events by C. this was a new story, the panel included minds.” For those in the audience for whom decade ago, they remain fresh in the public’s in 2003 that “Although the controversies of the “culture wars” of the late 1980s and 1990s, there was less and less room in the U.S. for public debate, hardly any room at all for dissent in the public sphere, and little interest in the media in oppositional viewpoints. Issues of surveillance and censorship imposed on artists become newly salient, particularly artists’ self-surveillance and self-censorship, if they want public funding. Moreover, the new technologies of the internet bring with them new opportunities for both artistic expression and censorship; a case challenging the obscenity provision of the Communications Decency Act was in April fast tracked for Supreme Court review. So where are we now? We asked our panelists to reflect on these issues. The result was a lively reflection on the case and its aftermath. Some highlights: Karen Finley suggested that George Bush et al. were upset at the time because progress was in fact being made: there is more of a presence of gays, women, minorities in the arts and politics. Holly Hughes recalled that it was difficult — and remains so — to see how to broaden the scope and put the incident in a larger context; she noted, further, that the left had failed to respond in any sustained way: a case needed to be made for work that was indeed provocative, work that provoked anxieties not only among right-wingers but among the left as well. John Fleck responded by noting that the incident had indeed politicized him; lines got drawn and the consequences of closing down avenues of expression loom large for science as well as the arts. Tim Miller put the events in the context of art and AIDS activism of the late 80s and early 90s, and sees the NEA controversy as part of an ongoing “huge toxic alphabet soup swirl”: HIV, NEA, INS, and now the FMA (Federal Marriage Act). Respondent William Pope.L asserted that radical art has to be the enemy of the state, even as it is also complicit with it, so that we should be ready for the arrows the state slings. Sapphire commented on the chilling effect of the case on a generation of people who saw what happened to the NEA 4, and discussed recent instances and issues of censorship and self-censorship, particularly post 9/11: a Muslim woman’s response to 9/11, or her own poem’s mention of Jenin. Carr remarked that the NEA now is only a shell; prior to its beginnings in 1964, there was no non-profit art world, but now, after the attacks on the NEA, there has been damage to the entire infrastructure of that world. From the audience, First Amendment attorney John Wrennios alerted people to the importance of the Communications Decency Act case. There was a sense, shared by audience and panelists, that the work of the NEA 4 had been crucially enabling and carries on—and that there is much work to do.

The NEA 4 gathered for the first time on April 15, 2004 to discuss their famous case and its effects on the arts today. In the early 1990s, the controversy surrounding a group of performance artists who were awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Arts nearly ended the agency. The artists - Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes and Tim Miller - came to be known as the “NEA 4” and found themselves at the center of a national debate on what constitutes art and to what extent the state should support artistic expression. Their case eventually went to the U.S. Supreme Court. In June 1998 the Supreme Court ruled against them, upholding a decency test for federal funding for the arts. The discussion, moderated by Marvin Taylor (Director, The Fales Library and Special Collections, NYU), included visual and performance artist William Pope.L, essayist and cultural historian C. Carr, and poet and performance artist Sapphire. The large audience included Mary Dorman, one of the attorneys for the case; Martha Wilson, Founding Director of Franklin Furnace; David Ross, former Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art; and performance artist Reno. I opened the event by presenting some context, starting with remarks on the aptness of the date of the panel. “What better day to discuss the use of federal funds—our tax dollars—than April 15 itself? What better time than now, when billions and billions of US dollars are being spent on war, to think afresh about what the government should be spending our money on, and what criteria are used to decide? What better day to meditate on what constitutes ‘decency’?”

For many people in the audience, the story of the “culture wars” of the late 1980s and 1990s had been indelibly etched on the brain. Even Dana Gioia, the current head of the National Endowment for the Arts, admitted in his first appearance in Congress in 2003 that “Although the controversies that troubled the NEA happened nearly a decade ago, they remain fresh in the public’s mind.” For those in the audience for whom this was a new story, the panel included a chronological account of events by C. Carr. In brief: In the wake of controversies surrounding the federal funding of work by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, the NEA rescinded grants it had awarded to the four performance artists. The gender and sexual politics and contents of their work were widely cited as the reasons for the grants’ denials. That broader social-political goals were clearly on the horizon: as Holly Hughes later observed, this persecution of artists by conservatives functioned as “a giant bake sale” for funding other projects that are less profitable: “killing abortion doctors, gutting the social safety net and fighting affirmative action, etc.”

By the mid-90s, particularly after the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, it seemed that every year brought a congressional battle to defend the NEA and its less controversial but still reviled sister agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities. The arguments in Congress sometimes took on a hallucinatory quality in which pornography seemed to lurk almost everywhere, queer works were defended by downplaying the sex in them, and race and sex were pitted against one another in bids for federal funding.

The NEA 4 case, which Bill Clinton decided to bring to the Supreme Court, dragged on until summer 1998, when the court issued its disappointing decision. The National Association of Artists’ Organizations, a correspondent in the case, issued a statement after the decision: “Now we are constrained by ‘decency and respect’ but we don’t know what these words mean. Instead we must guess, behave with caution and make publicly supported art [subject] to the whims of governmental powers.”

In the years since 1998, there have been some further high-profile attempts at censorship: then-mayor Rudy Giuliani threatened to shut down the “Sensation” show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999, his fury incited by elephant dung on an image of the Virgin Mary. That effort didn’t succeed, though the currency of concerns over museum censorship is attested by last season’s subplot on Showtime’s TV series “The L Word,” in which right-wing fury is aroused by an exhibition called “Provocation” mounted by lesbian museum director Bette Porter (Jennifer Beals). After 9/11 there is less and less room in the U.S. for public debate, hardly any room at all for dissent in the public sphere, and little interest in the media in oppositional viewpoints. Issues of surveillance and censorship imposed on artists become newly salient, particularly artists’ self-surveillance and self-censorship, if they want public funding. Moreover, the new technologies of the internet bring with them new opportunities for both artistic expression and censorship; a case challenging the obscenity provision of the Communications Decency Act was in April fast tracked for Supreme Court review.

So where are we now? We asked our panelists to reflect on these issues. The result was a lively reflection on the case and its aftermath. Some highlights: Karen Finley suggested that George Bush et al. were upset at the time because progress was in fact being made: there is more of a presence of gays, women, minorities in the arts and politics. Holly Hughes recalled that it was difficult — and remains so — to see how to broaden the scope and put the incident in a larger context; she noted, further, that the

Sylvester: The Life and Work of a Musical Icon by Judith A. Peraino

Judith A. Peraino is Associate Professor of Music at Cornell University. She participated in the fall CSGS conference on ‘70s superstar Sylvester; the following is her report.

On October 8th and 9th of 2004, New York University hosted an event called “Sylvester: The Life and Work of a Musical Icon,” organized by Carolyn Dinshaw, professor of English and the director of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, and Jason King, associate chair and assistant professor in the Clive Davis Department of Recorded Music. I call it an “event” rather than a “conference” because the latter word implies a stodginess that was avoided here this, to the great credit of the organizers. In the course of this two-day event, the academic panels (the last of five sessions) took an appropriate place as just one of many types of critical reception, one of many modes of contemplative discourse and celebration of Sylvester and his legacy.

Who was Sylvester? None of my students know; nor does he mean too much to any younger queer professorial colleagues. They may have heard his 1978 hit songs “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” or “Dance (Disco Heat),” but few have seen his videos, his album covers, or remember

Svati P. Shah: A Profile by Lisa Duggan

Svati P. Shah, the new Assistant Professor/Faculty Fellow in Gender and Sexuality Studies, recently returned from the 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. She was there from January 26 to 31 and was invited by Aksara, a women’s resource center in Mumbai, India. This year’s trip follows her participation in the 2004 World Social Forum held in Mumbai itself, which is also the site of Professor Shah’s research. In 2005, she completed a dissertation in anthropology and public health at Columbia, entitled Seeing Sexual Commerce: Gender, Sex and Work in the City of Mumbai.

In Mumbai, Shah worked with and interviewed sex workers, following their struggles to make a living, avoid stigma and violence, protect themselves from diseases including AIDS, organize, and manage their relations with the increasing number of researchers and NGOs interested in studying the sex industry. Working to avoid the twin pitfalls of seeing sex workers as the passive subjects of “sexual trafficking,” or representing them as “free agents,” Shah considers sex work within a landscape of constrained choices for poor women laboring “for the stomach.” Her research has been published in journals including Gender and History and New Labor Forum, and presented at conferences from Delhi and Mumbai to Montreal, Chicago, Ann Arbor, and New York.

Shah’s research is not only addressed to university-based scholars, however. Her work is embedded in a dense web of related activism around issues of labor, migration, poverty, race, globalization, gender and sexuality. She has affiliations with the Audre Lorde Project,
Lisa Duggan, GSS, American Studies

Here at NYU, Professor Shah will be teaching the Introduction to Gender and Sexuality Studies each fall. This spring she is also offering a course in Gender and Development, as well as the seminar on Theories of Gender and Sexuality. She also continues her commitments outside the academy, which involve her in local politics as well as global concerns like those brought together at the World Social Forum. She brings this network of engagements to our classrooms and hallways in Gender and Sexuality Studies.

Lisa Duggan, GSS, American Studies and History Associate Professor

The academic panels were nominally divided into two themes: the first on “Sylvester’s Impact on Race, Drag, and Celebrity,” and the second on his “Musical Legacy.” But as might be expected, these themes were inseparable; and so, for example, gender theorist Judith Halberstam spoke on Sylvester’s voice as aligned with the female in the first panel, while in the second panel musicologist Suzanne Cusick also spoke on his voice, placing it within the context of male African-American r&b singers. These two papers present in a nutshell two conflicting views about the limits and politics of gender: does Sylvester’s gender-bending falsetto represent an escape from phallocentric masculinity into femininity, or does it represent an expansion of masculinity to include femininity? One of Sylvester’s friends remarked that Sylvester always identified as a man, not as transgendered. It would seem, then, that Sylvester subscribed more to the latter view.

Other papers struck more concordant notes. Both Josh Kun and I connected Sylvester to the 1970s futurism of Sun Ra and George Clinton. Josh described these artists, as well as the other Sylvester—Sly Stone—as Sylvester’s “ghosts,” while I argued that the Astro-Egyptian queerness of Sun Ra had a more direct impact on punk, disco, and Sylvester. We were thrilled by the convergence of our thinking, which seemed to confirm that we had hit upon something that merits further research. Gayle Wald gave a fascinating paper on gender-subverting aspects of the gospel church traditions as “Sunday morning” foundation for Sylvester’s “Saturday night” transgressions, while journalist Kandia Crazy Horse tellingly struggled to find Sylvester’s name anywhere within the “Black Rock Pantheon.”

The event ended with a benefit concert featuring Martha Wash, Billy Porter, Su Su Bobien, and Kevin Aviance. Their passionate renditions of Sylvester’s songs made the perfect final statement of critical appraisal and community appreciation for this remarkable human being, who was far ahead of his own time. We have yet to catch up to him.

Reprinted with permission from The Newsletter for the LGBTQ Study Group of the American Musicological Society, Volume 14, Number 2, Fall 2004.
The 2004 Joan R. Heller Dissertation Award ($500) was shared by two NYU graduate students: Richard Kim (Program in American Studies) and Ricardo Montez (Department of Performance Studies). Kim’s dissertation, “Fellow Travelers: Orientalism, Homoeroticism and United States Empire,” explores American orientalism and male homoeroticism in late 19th-century travel writing, tourism and other modes of cultural exchange. His dissertation is, as he puts it, “the first book-length study to consider the impact of U.S. imperialism on American understandings of same-sex desire.” Montez, writing a dissertation entitled “Riding/Writing the Line: Keith Haring, Race, and the Performance of Desire,” views the work of graffiti artist Haring through the lenses of consumerism and sexual desire. Montez builds on recent scholarship that, he observes, “complicates the visibility of whiteness and racial production while moving the discussion beyond the ‘me too’ impulse of whiteness studies.”

Two students earned an Honorable Mention for the Heller Dissertation Award: Katherine Hawkins (Department of Comparative Literature) for “Queer Pathographic Writing: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Bill T. Jones, and Derek Jarman,” her dissertation on queer illness narratives tracing “queer practices” to be found in their writing and attempting to reconceptualize illness itself, and Ragan Rhyne (Department of Cinema Studies) for “The Pink and the Green: Sexuality, Visibility and Capital,” an investigation, according to Rhyne, of “how gays and lesbians have organized their political lives around and through the business practices of media production.”

The 2004 Joan R. Heller Undergraduate Scholarship in the amount of $1,000, for a continuing student majoring in Gender and Sexuality Studies, has been awarded to Nicolette Callaway, who will graduate this spring. As she describes her decision to pursue Gender and Sexuality Studies as a major came after realizing that all of her academic papers were focused on gender: in a powerful moment of retrospection, she recognized that she “put a gender spin on everything.” For Callaway, gender “permeates [her] perception of the world,” and she sees herself in the future bringing that perception to the stage as a performer in a complex play of subject and object: “[…] I am on a stage: I am a woman, an object, but it is me. I am performing myself as I perform someone else.”

Ragan Rhyne (Department of Cinema Studies) for “The Pink and the Green: Sexuality, Visibility and Capital,” an investigation, according to Rhyne, of “how gays and lesbians have organized their political lives around and through the business practices of media production.”

**Interview with GSS Alumna: Sriya Shrestha** by Petra Frank

What did you major in as an undergraduate?
I majored in Gender and Sexuality Studies and Metropolitan Studies.

What or who first got you interested in gender and sexuality? What was the first gender class you ever took?
My first Gender and Sexuality Studies course was Introduction to Women’s Studies, before the name of the program was changed to Gender and Sexuality Studies, with Rhoda Kananaeh. She was an excellent instructor, and I really learned a lot from the class. However, I was skeptical of how much the program as a whole would concentrate on issues related to women of color and transnational feminisms and the intersections of race, class and gender. Later, I listened to Rahab Abdilahri speak at an event called “Where’s the Color in Women’s Studies?” After talking to her after the event, she assured me that the Gender and Sexuality Studies program would certainly have the transnational focus I was interested in and encouraged me to take her class. I did and found that Gender and Sexuality Studies and her classes focused on the issues I was interested in, particularly as they related to power, social justice, and resistance, not only in discussions of women of color feminisms and transnational issues but also in the focus reiterated by the new title of deconstructing gender and sexuality.

What did you do this past summer after graduation?
I worked part-time at OASIS, the Office for African American, Latino and Asian American Student Services at NYU, and I did some childcare a couple days a week. I also volunteered as an adult support person for a summer youth program called Youth Power, part of a community-based organization for working class and low-income South Asians called Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM). This was an incredible experience where I learned so much, particularly from the youth facilitators/organizers I was working with.

What did you learn?
I learned how to apply the theories I was taught in classes to real-life situations. There is a difference between hearing about these things and putting them into practice. Working with the group taught me basic, practical skills. I learned how to facilitate workshops and helped organize a street festival. I started to understand how to delegate tasks and work with young people on organizing events and actions and how to teach people about issues like heterosexism, homophobia, and sexism. Being involved in an organization led by youth and by the people most affected by the issues the organization dealt with helped me understand what, as an ally, I can do in support of them.

What were your plans for the future back then? Have you found that note that you’re in the “real world” your plans have changed? Have you become more “realistic”?
I think a lot of undergraduates, and young people generally, are told that doing work for social change and social justice is “idealistic,” and that being faced with the “real world” will change all of this. Personally, I centered my education and my vision for my future around working for greater justice and equality, and that has not changed. For me, the “real world” consists of those folks who are everyday fighting the struggles I read and learned about as an NYU student. And now I know more about how the ideas I learned about operate on a day-to-day level in people’s lived realities. So perhaps, in this sense, I am more realistic, but not less committed to my ideals.

Would you say, then, that being a student was not as “ivory tower” and disconnected as some might say?
Being a student is “ivory tower” in the sense that students are in a sheltered space when they are reading, discussing, and learning about social issues. The people we were talking about weren’t always in those classrooms, and didn’t always attend those events where we talked about their issues over wine and cheese. Of course there’s nothing wrong with talking theory over wine and cheese, but what we need to understand is there is a disconnection. Speaking theoretically and doing this work are different things, and in order to find the truth we must have direct contact with people who are directly affected. We also need to understand that we, as students, are privileged just to be students, that we are lucky to have access to information and theories, but it is privileged specifically because those people aren’t there. For education to be useful, we need to recognize this privilege and this disconnection.

Where are you working now? What does your job consist of?
I am still working at OASIS. I’m mostly doing research on issues related to students of color and higher education as well as some programming and supporting the
Assistant Vice President for Diversity and Student Community in his duties, such as compiling annual reports and other office related data.

Could you name some of those issues?
Mostly retention. We need to recognize that although it is important to get students of color to come to universities, it is equally important, if not more, to have them be comfortable once they are here. If change is going to happen, it needs to be not only about quantity, but also about quality. It is also necessary for there to be a change in the amount of professors and mentors of color. We need an active change. When a person of color graduates from a university the degree in their hand is not the only valuable thing. That is not what is going to affect active change. What will is the ability to view things critically and to question, and to bring back to their communities the things they learned in school.

Do you plan on going to grad school? Where?
I plan on going to graduate school in the next year or so. I will probably continue to study under Professor Abdulhadi at the University of Michigan- Dearborn and later on go on to get my PhD or law degree back on the East Coast.

What do you think were the most valuable lessons you learned at NYU? What are some things you have learned in the “real world”?
I learned a lot from the Gender and Sexuality Studies courses I took that helped me understand better how powerful, oppression, resistance and social change work as well as new ways to look at things we too often take for granted like race, class, gender, sexuality and feminism. From the “real world,” I’ve learned a lot about how the topics I studied in school, like social justice and how to create change, function in reality. I’ve learned to constantly be aware of the power dynamics present everywhere and in everything. And the importance of using my privilege as university graduate to support the “real world” resistance happening in communities all over the world by sharing the knowledge that I’ve had access to. Not only do I want to share the things I have learned as a result of having access to certain resources others may not have, I want to use that access to help get other people access. I also need to recognize that just because I have had this access does not mean that I have all the answers. People who are directly affected by various forms of oppression are aware of their own situations in a real way; they get the dynamics of oppression as well as who and what is oppressing them, in a way you cannot be taught in college. Folks fighting every day against inequality and injustice have plenty to teach me whether they’ve got a college degree or not.

For more information on DRUM (Desis Rising Up and Moving) or to make a donation, go to their website at www.drumnation.org.

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Reading Gender in Islamic History: The Role of the Harem by Nadia Maria El Cheikh

Nadia Maria El Cheikh

Professor Nadia Maria El Cheikh of the American University in Beirut visited the CSGS in spring 2004. A dynamic medievalist whose works in the field of women’s and gender studies, she brought a wealth of expertise and excitement to the NYU community during her 2-week stay. Her public lecture included materials now published in her article, “Gender and Politics in the Harem of al-Muqtaḍar,” in Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge University Press, 2004). The following is an excerpt, reprinted (without notes) with permission.

[1] It has been assumed that the segregation of the sexes, a prevalent feature of the urban upper-class Muslim society, created a gender-based dichotomy between easily discernible public and private spheres. Women have been identified exclusively with the harem and denied any influence beyond its physical boundaries. Conversely, the harem has been seen as a woman’s world, domestic, private and parochial. [leslie] Peirce has pointed to a misunderstanding of the nature and function of the harem institution. In contrast to the image of a group of concubines existing solely for the sexual convenience of their master, the harem of a household included women related to the male head of the household and to each other in an often complex set of relationships, many of which did not include a sexual component. Recent research has similarly attempted to challenge the notion of rigidly demarcated and mutually impenetrable territories, showing that the private and public spheres were anything but bipolar, that the two shared many points of contact with the other in varying historical circumstances.

Umm al-Muqtaḍar [the mother of the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtaḍar (295–320/908–932)] surrounded herself with the trappings of authority. She behaved as a professional, establishing a bureau with secretaries who handled political and military affairs. . . . Her influence was so great, fear of her was such, that any negative mention of her, even in her absence, had sinister consequences. The vizier Abū al-Furat, during his third term in office, once disclaimed being in fear of any woman. The reference was meant to be to Umm al-Muqtaḍar. Those present perceived that his fall was now near at hand. . . . Female roles and ideologies of femininity do not exist in a social vacuum. Women and ideas about women’s roles existed and interacted with male roles and notions of masculinity. . . . Rather than presenting an assessment of the actual actions of these women, the sources concentrated on general negative stereotypes linked with women who crossed over to the public political realm. Women striding across conventional social boundaries called upon themselves the vitriolic condemnation of the men who recorded their activities. Such writers organized the experiences of these women and represented them within a particular perceptual framework, one which firmly upheld the paradigm of public versus private spheres, a paradigm which “preserves the actions of women from being considered according to the same criteria as those of males” (Arleen W. Saxonhouse).

Adopting the well-entrenched public-private dichotomy, the medieval authors could not incorporate women’s public activities. For their interpretations to be consistent with this worldview, they had to explain this particular transgression away by insisting that it was a sign of deterioration of the community and thus a dangerous event. Thus, these explanations are part of rhetorical strategies that reflect, to some extent, the style of the Arabic texts as well as the assumptions, mentalities and ideologies of the medieval authors. In their assessment of Umm al-Muqtaḍar, the texts revealed, therefore, much about politics, gender and the interpretation of the past as presented exclusively by men.
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Coming Up at CSGS

Tuesday, April 5th, 6:30 – 8 pm
19 University Place, Room 222

THE NON-PERFORMATIVITY OF ANTI-RACISM
Sara Ahmed, Goldsmiths College, University of London

Ahmed argues that anti-racist speech acts do not do what they say. Such speech acts could be described as non-performative, requiring a new approach to the relation between texts and social action. The non-performativity of the term diversity is explored, drawing on data collected from UK and Australian interviews.

With response by Tavia Nyong’o, Performance Studies, NYU

Tuesday, April 12th, 6:30 – 8 pm
La Maison Française, 16 Washington Mews

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE DEBATES IN FRANCE
Didier Eribon

Eribon, author of the recent Sur cet instant fragile…, will discuss the politics of the same-sex marriage movement in France.

With response by Richard Kim, American Studies Program, NYU

Thursday, April 14th, 6:30 – 8 pm
Fales Library, 70 Washington Square South, 3rd Floor

ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman host a tour through their ACT UP Oral History Project.

Faculty members from diverse disciplines at NYU will provide commentaries and pose questions from the perspectives of their fields.

Sponsored by the NYU Fales Library; co-sponsored by CSGS

Tuesday, April 19th, 12:30 – 1:45 pm
CSGS Conference Room, 285 Mercer Street, 3rd Floor

POPULAR LAMENTS: AFFECTIVE LITERACY, DEMOCRATIZATION AND WAR
Neferti X. M. Tadiar, History of Consciousness Department, University of California Santa Cruz

This talk focuses on the cultural literacy created by popular laments in the Philippines in the 1970s and 1980s. Tadiar foregrounds the social conditions of this literacy and the political significance of what gets lost as the popular revolt gives rise to an emergent transnational rhetoric of democratization and power under globalization.