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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 it did 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

circulated 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

the worst in us as stories circulated of corruption, vandalism and abuse.

Yet the Tsunami also took away something else. 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 shelling 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

Even as we politicized the natural disaster, we naturalized a political disaster of our own making.

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 a life-line for survival. Everyone had a tragic story to tell. The waves humbled both the privileged and the poor. Nor did it take long for us to politicize the natural disaster. Explanations were sought for the extent of damage and the blame game began: for the failure of coastal conservation, for the lack of an early warning system, for the grinding poverty that kept many of the victims in flimsy homes that could not withstand the onslaught of the waves, for the politicization of the distribution of relief aid. Women’s special needs – for privacy and security in refugee camps, for items of personal hygiene, for nutrition for pregnant and nursing mothers, and for coping with immense grief – went untold. The best humanistic values, demonstrated in acts of survival, generosity and courage in the immediate aftermath of the waves, soon receded with the waters to bring forth

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 remembrances 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 Mullativu). 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. ■

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From the Director: GSS FAQs by Carolyn Dinshaw

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 team 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 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

Men and Cinema in Kerala by Muraleedharan T



Muraleedharan T, from the Department of English Literature, St. Aloysius College, Trichur, India, was a Fulbright Senior Research Scholar at the CSGS in 2004. Working on the concept of queerness in South Indian film, he used the rich resources of the CSGS and New York City in producing his article, "Pleasures, Desires and Fixtures: Men and Cinema in Kerala." The following is an excerpt, tracking changes in representations of masculinity.

"Heterosexual" figures in publicity posters [for South Indian films] are now frequently replaced by same-sex pairs. If transformations in representing the male figure in publicity campaigns are seen as shifts in the structuring of desire, the late 1990s marked an important stage. This, I would argue, is a significant shift in the configuration of male corporeality.

Particularly striking is the publicity campaign of the recent Tamil film

Samasthanam (2002) which featured an important star from Malayalam cinema. The film is supposed to be about a very "normal" male friendship. The publicity campaign in Kerala was entirely focused on the two male stars, Suresh Gopi and Sarath Kumar. The other performers, especially the female leads, received scanty attention in the posters. Hoardings and billboards portraying the two men appeared everywhere long before the film's release, and what one could hardly miss was the pronounced emphasis on the physical intimacy of the two males they featured. If the purpose of a publicity campaign is to offer potential viewers a taste of what they are to expect in large doses in the film, then what this film seemed to promise was not merely the friendship of two men, but also the (fetishized?) spectacle of the physical intimacy of two handsome men.

The most telling poster was the one which showed the faces of the two men in a close-up, with Suresh Gopi blowing into the eyes of Sarath Kumar, ostensibly to soothe a sore eye. Yet the picture could also give an initial impression that one

man is going to kiss the other. I consider these posters significant as they mark a transformation of the agency through which desire for the "male body" is routed: the desiring self is no more a "frustrated female" nor an "absent and hence ungendered" spectator, but a male icon with a celebrated masculinity. Yet the film presents these men as married to women, functioning as protective husbands and respectable members of a traditional social order. Thus the physical intimacy between two men is inscribed into a pleasurable spectacle, offering

multiple locations of identification, without raising any significant disruptions to the patriarchal order. ■



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 listserv 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 Fulbright New Century Scholar and on leave this year.

For the spring 2005 semester, **Lerna Ekmekcioglu** (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 Homosexuality* as the "Best of Volume" for 2003.

Orly Lubin, from the Department of Comparative Literature and the Women Studies Program at Tel Aviv University,

CSGS Update



Gary Dowsett

In the fall, Columbia University Associate Professor Gary Dowsett gave a lunch talk on *Abjection, Objection, Subjection: Unbending the Aussie Poof as Citizen*, looking at the history and politics of Australian gay liberation.



Dicle Kogacioglu

Interventions on Honor Crimes in the Turkish Political Arena was the title of the talk by Sabanci University (Istanbul) faculty member Dicle Kogacioglu, discussing power relations and invested desires of different political movements as they define honor crimes and make interventions.

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 **Eser 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 *Corpus*, 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 Man: Gay Male Intimacy and Kinship in a Global Metropolis*. This semester she is teaching the Gender and Sexuality Studies Senior Seminar. ■

Is art more “decent” now? The NEA 4 at the CSGS

by Carolyn Dinshaw



NEA 4 artist
Holly Hughes

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’ denial, but broader sociopolitical 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 defund 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 co-respondent 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

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. C. 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 Wirenius 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. ■

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 much to my 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

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 Akshara, 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,

his remarkable appearances on *American Band Stand*, *The Tonight Show*, or *The Dinah Shore Show*. As Dinshaw and King note in the program, Sylvester has been “critically overlooked.” Simply put, Sylvester was an openly gay, African-American, drag queen, disco star of the late 1970s and early 80s. But there is nothing simple about that astounding list of identifying aspects. Long before the media embraced mainstream gay men in *Will and Grace* or *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and just before the post-punk gender provocations of Boy George, k.d. lang and others, Sylvester paved their way by publicly insisting on an identity that broke every rule of gender, sexual, and racial normalcy.

Most of the sessions were devoted to presenting a rich portrait of Sylvester through sound and video clips, the work of visual, print, and performance biographers, the reminiscences of friends and colleagues (including Martha Wash, one of his back-up singers, who went on to record “It’s Raining Men,” among other hits). Born Sylvester James in 1946 in Los Angeles, Sylvester was hailed as a gospel-singing child prodigy, but his predilection for designing and wearing



Panelist Josh Kun and Tavia Nyong'o

women’s clothes in high school bounced him out of school and into L.A.’s drag queen cliques. His interest in performance led him to San Francisco and the psychedelic, orgiastic theater troupe called the Cockettes. Sylvester soon became the star attraction of the troupe, singing the classic blues of Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday in what would become his trademark falsetto, and dressing in period drag. From the Cockettes Sylvester went on to record several r&b albums in the early 1970s, with a group called the Hot Band. It

SALGA: South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association, NGOs working on issues of HIV, sex work and migrant labor in the US and in Bombay, as well as autonomous feminist organizations in India, including Forum Against the Oppression of Women. Her writing also extends beyond scholarly journals, appearing in *Trikone Magazine: Organizing and Queer South Asians* and in *SAMAR: South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection*.

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



Panelists Gayle Wald, Lindon Barrett and Judith Halberstam, and audience member Seth Clark Silberman

was an incongruous pairing of a feminine black falsetto and an all-white, long-haired bunch of good ol’ boys.

Panelists who knew Sylvester spoke warmly of his generosity, especially towards closeted artists who would call him for advice; his penchant for buying clothes and jewelry (one friend remembered him saying: “I’m shopping for Jesus”); and his engagement with all types of music. Several speakers noted, however, that Sylvester did not originally think much of disco, preferring to perform styles that were closer to gospel and blues. But disco, with its glamour and escapism, proved to be the musical environment capacious enough to embrace Sylvester and all his challenges to gender and racial boundaries.

White middle-class queers have all but forgotten Sylvester, but his status as an icon for urban African-American queers is significant, especially for those who explore drag and effeminacy against the grain of “gay macho.” The single most impressive and moving thing about this celebration was the warmth and engagement of the audience, heavily populated by gay African-American men from the local New York community. Up to the last presentation—which was mine—the substantial audience responded with hearty laughter at jokes, verbal and gestural affirmations of points well made, and probing questions. Over and over they explicitly and implicitly conveyed a sense of excitement and gratitude that Sylvester was finally being given his due. An inconspicuously dressed RuPaul spoke from the audience,



Friends of Sylvester: Richard Corsello, Tom Martin, Martha Wash and Ed Shepard

confirming that Sylvester was one of his inspirations. Djola Branner, a performance artist and co-founder of Pomo Afro Homos, also discussed Sylvester’s impact on the formation of his own career, and showed video clips of his theater piece “Mighty Real: A Tribute to Sylvester.” The audience was treated to readings from Joshua Gamson’s biography, and clips of Tim Smyth’s forthcoming video documentary.

Among the archive video clips screened (many provided by Tim Smyth), two stand out that encapsulate Sylvester’s uncontainable personality and remarkable courage. In the first, his 1987 New Year’s Eve appearance on *The Tonight Show* hosted by Joan Rivers, Sylvester came on stage with an outrageously wild pink-orange hair-do, and a feminine pantsuit. In conversation, Joan asks “Are you a drag queen?” and Sylvester answers, “I’m



Speaker Joshua Gamson

Sylvester,” thus refusing even that category. When the topic moves on to his love of jewelry, Joan remarks on his rings. “These,” Sylvester says, “are my wedding set.” Of course Joan asks, “Who are you married to?” and without missing a beat Sylvester answers, “Rick.” The conversation continues with feigned embarrassment from Sylvester about Rick’s parents watching, but with full disclosure of Rick’s last name, how long they’ve been together, and how they met. Sylvester’s matter-of-factness about his queer gender and sexuality, and his gay marriage, is stunning, even seventeen years later.

The second video clip that impressed me also concerns Sylvester’s matter-of-factness. In a 1986 interview for BET he spoke seriously and frankly about the AIDS crisis, still considered a “gay plague.” Sylvester, who died from AIDS-related complications in 1988, made a portentous statement about how AIDS could become devastating for the black community. Sylvester was the first media star to admit to having AIDS, and he fought against the policies of silence and inaction on the part of the Reagan administration.

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



Jason King and panelist Kandia Crazy Horse

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 phallogocentric 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



Conference organizers Carolyn Dinshaw and Jason King

of Sun Ra had a more direct impact on funk, 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. ■

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2004 Joan R. Heller Award Recipients

Last May, CSGS announced the recipients of the third annual Joan R. Heller Dissertation Award and Undergraduate Scholarship. The Joan R. Heller Awards aim to foster and promote scholarship in the area of Gender and Sexuality Studies.

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

Rhyme (Department of Cinema Studies) for "The Pink and the Green: Sexuality, Visibility and Capital," an investigation, according to Rhyme, 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 it, 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." ■

Joan R. Heller, NYU alumna and generous benefactor of the CSGS, lost her battle with lung cancer on May 10, 2004. She is survived by her partner, Diane Bernard. We are grateful to have had a chance to share in her vision of Gender and Sexuality Studies and her spirit of excitement about the promise of new scholarship, and we will miss her.



Honorable Mention Award recipient
Ragan Rhyme



Scholarship recipient Nicolette Callaway



Dissertation Award Winners Ricardo Montez and Richard Kim

Interview with GSS Alumna: Sriya Shrestha by Petra Frank



GSS Alumna Sriya Shrestha

What did you major in as an undergrad?

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 Kanaaneh. 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 Rabab Abdulhadi 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 now 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 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 power, 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.

CSGS Update



Pedagogy Workshop

Alisa Solomon (Baruch College/CUNY Graduate Center) and two participants at a workshop on "Advocacy in the Classroom," part of the ongoing Pedagogy series co-presented by the CSGS and CUNY's Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLGS).



Kathy Heffern and Rabab Abdulhadi

NYU student Kathy Heffern with departing Assistant Professor/Faculty Fellow Rabab Abdulhadi who received an Outstanding Faculty/Staff Service Award from the NYU LGBT Student Services Office at a party in her honor at the CSGS last May.



Ruth Vanita and Minu Tharoor

Ruth Vanita (University of Montana) and Minu Tharoor (NYU) discuss details at Vanita's lunch talk last spring on *Bhagiratha, Son of Two Mothers: Female-Female Sexual Union and Miraculous Reproduction in Premodern Indian Texts*, part of her ongoing work on premodern antecedents of same-sex marriage in India and the West.



Christina Hanhardt

NYU American Studies doctoral student Christina Hanhardt gave a lunch talk last spring on *Safe Space: Sexual Minorities, Uneven Urban Development, and the Politics of Violence*, drawing from her Heller Award winning dissertation work on the politics of "safety" in LGBT social movements.

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 who 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-Muqtadir," 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.

[I]t 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. L[eslie] 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-Muqtadir [the mother of the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir (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 Ibn al-Furāt, during his third term in office, once disclaimed being in fear of any woman. The reference was meant to be to Umm al-Muqtadir. 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 "prevents the actions of women from being considered according to the same criteria as those of males" (Arlene 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-Muqtadir, the texts revealed, therefore, much about politics, gender and the interpretation of the past as presented exclusively by men. ■

