

Letters

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Gender, Sexuality, and the Public Interest: From State Policy to Academic Pedagogy

By Lisa Duggan

During 2002/2003, the Fellows Program at the Warren Center is taking on a double-edged challenge: to create an interdisciplinary conversation among scholars working in the field of gender and sexuality studies, and to forge links from this scholarship to the range of arenas in which issues of gender and sexuality engage the public interest. Toward these ends, I join Vanderbilt faculty from the fields of literature, communications, political theory, philosophy, and history to map the overlapping territories of our common research and teaching interests and to explore the political and cultural debates that surround them. Our discussions during the fall 2002 semester have therefore included the planning of a new graduate Gender Studies certificate program at Vanderbilt, consideration of the organization and content for a new textbook in the history of sexuality, and dissection of the controversies framing the emergence of contemporary transgender identities and politics.

I feel especially lucky to join the Warren Center Fellows Program this year, as my own research, teaching, writing, and activism intersect with this year's theme ("Gender, Sexuality, and Cultural Politics") and Fellows' interests at multiple

points. My first book, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, (Routledge, 1995) co-authored with Nan Hunter,



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examines a range of debates in contemporary sexual politics. Drawing on insights from feminist political and social theory and women's history, and addressing multiple audiences, we argue for the importance of historical context in understanding controversies over pornography, prostitution, public funding for homoerotic art, and the culture wars in higher education. Our

primary goal was to create a set of productive links among various academic fields focusing on gender and sexuality and between this scholarship and diverse locations of public debate and policy formation. My second book, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence and American Modernity*, (Duke University Press, 2000) focuses on a similar goal from a different angle of vision. This book traces the emergence of new sexual identities, specifically "lesbian" identity, in the period from 1880 to 1920. At that time, wide public exposure to new ideas about sexuality and identity occurred through the workings of a range of self-consciously modern national institutions—the courts, the mass circulation press, and new scientific publications and organizations, as well as through literary and popular cultural forms. Controversies over sexual identities and their meanings were centered in the state, implicated in the workings of the economy, and influenced by hierarchies of race, gender, and class. This web of

related issues was not confined to some marginal zone of "merely cultural" concern, but affected the core concepts of equality, freedom, democracy, and citizenship during the first half of the twentieth century.

As I continued to reflect on this set of issues, the notorious Clinton-Lewinsky sex scandal gripped center stage in U.S. national politics, raising the question of the relationship of gender and sexuality to state politics in both a highlighted and a distressingly fuzzy and distorting way. In response, I co-edited a volume of essays with literary scholar Lauren Berlant, *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the Public Interest* (New York University Press, 2001). This collection of articles addressed the broad political and cultural impact of the Clinton/Lewinsky sex scandal and the related effort to impeach President Clinton, from perspectives not included in the mountain of commentary by pundits and politicians that satu-

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rated the corporate media as the scandal dragged on. Contributors included historians, social scientists, literary and cultural critics, journalists, and activists. This project, like *Sex Wars*, was designed to cross the disciplinary boundaries of scholarly investigation and to address broad public debates, timely issues, and multiple audiences.

The interests and engagements reflected in all of these projects—an emphasis on interdisciplinary exchange, and on academic/activist cross-fertilizations on issues of gender, sexuality, and politics—brought me to the Warren Center Fellows Program this year, where my next two projects are now in progress. During the fall, I am finishing a short book to be published by Beacon Press, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Decline of Democracy*. This book outlines and analyzes the hidden and internally conflicted cultural and sexual agendas of “neoliberalism”—the brand name for the form of pro-corporate, “free market, anti-big government” rhetoric shaping U.S. policy and dominating international financial institutions since the early 1980s. Neoliberalism, associated primarily with economic and trade policy, is often presented not so much as a particular set of interests and political interventions, but as a kind of non-politics. Neoliberalism appears as a way of being reasonable and of promoting universally desirable forms of economic expansion and democratic government globally. Who could be against greater wealth and more democracy? Since the fall of the Soviet empire at the end of the 1980s, neoliberals (who range from conservative Republicans like George W. Bush to centrist De-

mocrats like Bill Clinton) have argued that all alternatives to the U.S. model have failed—fascism, communism, socialism, and even the relatively mild forms of the welfare state advocated by social democrats, labor movements, and neo-Keynesians. Not trumpeted are the sharply declining participation rates in the Western “democracies,” and the rapidly expanding, vast economic inequalities that neoliberal policies have generated in the U.S. and Great Britain, especially.

The cultural politics of neoliberalism are considered and debated relatively rarely, except in discussions of the economic and political mechanisms of U.S. cultural imperialism. In the domestic arena, the “culture wars” of the past twenty years are generally discussed separately from questions of monetary and fiscal policy, trade negotiations, and economic indicators—the recognized realm of neoliberal policy. But in a wide range of cultural policy territories—from public spending for culture and education, to the “moral” foundations for welfare reform, and from affirmative action to marriage and domestic partnership debates—neoliberalism’s profoundly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian agenda has shaped public discussion. The ostensibly “non-political” neoliberalism proves, in fact, to have a contradictory and contested sexual politics, not unlike the equally contradictory and internally contested economic and trade politics that have defined the location “neoliberal” since the Reagan/Thatcher ’80s.

The Twilight of Equality examines the development of neoliberalism’s cultural and identity politics since the 1970s. This development has been

based on a master rhetoric of “public” vs. “private” life, that follows in the wake of bitter contests over those rhetorical boundaries during the New Deal of the 1940s and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s. During the 1970s and ’80s, the rhetoric and strategies of “privatization” grew from such seedbeds. In this book, the political agendas of neoliberalism—hidden behind its non-political managerial/technical facade—emerge from within this historical context.

The engagement in *The Twilight of Equality*, with the raging cultural and political battles over the New Deal and the civil rights movement, and with the interconnecting battles over the politics of gender and sexuality from the 1940s through the 1980s, led me to my next long-term research interest—and the one to which I will be devoting most of my time at the Warren Center to developing—the political and cultural storms surrounding the career of North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms. This book will examine Helms’s political journey, and through it the deployment of race, gender, and sexuality in the long term shift from the New Deal political cultures of the 1930s and ’40s to Republican dominance of national electoral politics in the 1980s. I hope to show the linkages of the politics of gender, sexuality, class, and race with contested economic changes and public policy debates.

At this moment, as Jesse Helms leaves the national stage following his retirement from the U.S. Senate, the meanings of American nationalism have rarely seemed more contested and globally consequential. Following the events of Sep-

tember 11, 2001, the legacy of Helms’s brand of U.S. unilateralism and racial nationalism lives on, though in a political context vastly changed from the Cold War, anti-New Deal, anti-civil rights movement politics that shaped his efforts during the 1950s and ’60s and the New Right Republican “family values” conservatism that brought him to national prominence in the 1970s and ’80s. “One Nation? Jesse Helms and the Politics of Americanism” will assess Helms’s legacy in a series of chronologically organized, thematically focused, and interrelated historical essays designed to connect questions of state policy, foreign relations, and economic decision-making to issues of racial conflict, gender hierarchies, and sexual politics in the United States.

Simultaneously marginal and central, ridiculed and feared, Jesse Helms has been a paradoxical figure in American politics. Seemingly occupying the far right edge of the political spectrum in national party politics since his election to the Senate in 1972, Helms has nonetheless wielded considerable power over more centrist and mainstream colleagues—most recently as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Many of the themes and projects of the present Republican party echo those of Helms’s long career in local, state, regional, national, and even international politics.

“One Nation?” will trace Helms’s political formation and impact, from his early newspaper and radio editorials of the 1950s and ’60s, through his local political activism as a member of the Democratic Party, to his 1970 conversion to the Republicans, including his high

More than any other single politician, Jesse Helms has been responsible for the late twentieth century “culture war.”

profile Senate campaigns and career. The point will be to focus on Helms, not in order to reconstruct his life story, but in order to illuminate the economic, cultural, and political forces that shaped him, and that he in turn manipulated. The overall analytic interest of the study will be in the shifts in the contested meanings of “Americanism,” from the post World War II period to this war-poised moment in U.S. political culture broadly conceived. The focus on Helms will provide a lens through which to clarify and analyze this shift, tracing mutually intertwined contests over race, morality, religion, foreign policy, and global political and economic institutions.

The chapters included in the book will address a series of questions in a range of thematic areas, including Helms’s constant focus on issues of race, gender, and sexuality. For example, as early as 1950, when New Dealer and anti-segregationist Frank Porter Graham of North Carolina ran for the Senate, Willis Smith opposed him in the Democratic primary with ads that read, “WAKE UP WHITE PEOPLE. Do You Want Negroes Working Beside You, Your Wife and Daughters? Using Your Toilet Facilities? Frank Graham Favors Mingling of the Races.” The media consultant for this campaign was the young Jesse Helms. From that time to the present day, race, gender, and sexuality have been a central theme of Helms’s political strategies and goals. In this he has been both completely typical, reflecting both regional and national histories of racial inequality and race baiting, as well as pioneering in developing new ap-

proaches to the explicit and coded use of race in constructing transmuting forms of racial nationalism in the postwar period. The study will analyze the intersections of this racial nationalism with issues of gender and sexuality and with economic policies and global politics during this period.

Helms’s political rhetoric and strategies were developed at the crossroads of conservatism and populism. As a specifically Southern political figure, Helms shares much with a broad and varied range of Southern populists, including Huey P. Long, Strom Thurmond, and George Wallace. But he also shares a political tradition of right wing conservatism represented by figures from other regions, such as Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan. “One Nation?” will examine the convergence of various streams of populism and conservatism, in the South and elsewhere, in the production of the “New Right” in the 1980s. Helms is a central figure in this convergence, with a hand in a huge range of fundraising and organizational efforts leading to national visibility in the 1980 presidential campaign.

Jesse Helms is actually one of the architects of the massively expensive, media savvy modern political campaign. His \$22 million race against Governor James B. Hunt, Jr., in 1984 was, at the time, the most costly Senate campaign in American history. His campaign in 1990 against former Charlotte mayor Harvey B. Gantt raised the negative attack advertising campaign strategy to new levels (laying the groundwork particularly for George H. W. Bush’s notorious Willie Horton ad in the

late 1980s). This study will examine the economic, political, and cultural underpinnings for this kind of campaign. The construction of Helms’s massive fundraising machine, his ties to particular industries (especially tobacco and banking), and his use of “hot button” cultural issues to manipulate political allegiances and alignments through television advertising will all be addressed.

And it is in the deployment of the “hot button” issue that Helms has especially excelled. More than any other single politician, Jesse Helms has been responsible for the late twentieth century “culture war.” His attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts during the 1980s helped galvanize similar attacks on the humanities and public broadcasting in the 1990s. These attacks built on anti-state and anti-tax sentiment, crystallized in voter initiatives following California’s Proposition 13, passed during the 1970s. Helms worked to link suspicion of public expenditure in general, to hostility to “elite culture,” especially feminist, gay, and left artists and arts institutions. The study will focus on the growth of these attacks and their place in larger strategies for shrinking the “public sphere” for economic redistribution as well as artistic, cultural, and political debate.

Though these attacks on “obscene” art and arts funding led to ever higher public visibility for Helms, his impact has not been solely or even primarily in the arena of art and culture. Since the 1970s, Helms has participated in building the foundations for a nationally based, neoliberal/

conservative libertarian politics of the minimal state, with an emphasis on a low wage, low service economy, pro-business, anti-regulatory public policies, and isolationist international relations (always in fierce contest with global economic interests based or represented in the U.S. by conservative, as well as centrist, neoliberal institutions and politicians). These approaches to government have been precariously combined in Helms’s political philosophy, with religiously based moral conservatism and state-promoted “family values” (also fiercely debated across the full spectrum of electoral politics). Such apparent contradictions have been joined in images of “the nation” in Helms’s political rhetoric, along with his construction of citizenship and the national “interest.” This study will analyze and contextualize Helms’s invocation of “family values,” “morality,” and “common sense” with particular forms of “free market” and racial nationalism, through shifting alignments of racial, sexual, and gendered figures from the 1950s through the end of the twentieth century.

The intersecting questions and issues in this project and in the earlier ones that have brought me to the Warren Center during 2002/2003 will continue to develop as I work on my own research this year. The opportunity to share these questions and explore these issues with a group of scholars from such a broad range of disciplines and with various engagements in scholarship, pedagogy, politics, and policy is especially challenging, as well as promising. By the term’s end there will be much more to report from these quarters.

“Understanding the Middle East” Lecture Series

The Warren Center is sponsoring a lecture series during the 2002/2003 academic year entitled “Understanding the Middle East.” The first lecture was presented on Tuesday, November 19th, by Benjamin Barber, Gershon and Carol Kekst Professor of Civil Society, University of Maryland and director, New York office of the Democracy Collaborative. Professor Barber’s fifteen books include *Strong Democracy* (1984) and the international best-seller *Jihad Vs. McWorld* (1995). His two most recent books are *A Passion for Democracy* (1999) and *The Truth of Power: Intellectual Affairs in the Clinton White House* (2002). His lecture at Vanderbilt was entitled “America’s World: Pax Americana or Lex Humana.”

On March 20th, Ebrahim E. I. Moosa, associate professor, Department of Religious Studies at Duke University and co-director of the Center for the Study of Muslim Networks, will speak at Vanderbilt. Professor Moosa’s research interests are in the area of Islamic thought, especially Islamic law, ethics, theology, and critical theory. He is the author of many published essays in Islamic thought ranging from issues in ethics and law covering topics such as human rights, women’s rights, Muslim family law, medical ethics, and political ethics to historical studies that deal with questions of Qur’an exegesis and

medieval Islamic law and philosophy. He is especially interested in the way religious traditions encounter modernity and the way new conceptions of history and culture dialogically engage with the Islamic heritage. Currently he is finishing a manuscript called “A Poetics of Imagination: Ghazali and the Construction of Muslim Thought” and has a second work-in-progress provisionally titled “After Empire: Rethinking Islam in (Post) Modernity.” Moosa is considered to be among the foremost figures of a new generation of Muslim thinkers.

Kanan Makiya, adjunct professor of Near Eastern Studies, Brandeis University, will present a lecture entitled “The United States and Post-Saddam Iraq” on April 2nd. His book *Republic of Fear* (1989) became a bestseller after Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. Professor Makiya’s next book, *The Monument* (1991), is an essay on the aesthetics of power and kitsch. Both *Republic of Fear* and *The Monument* were written under the pseudonym, Samir al-Khalil. *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World* (1993) was published under Makiya’s own name. It was awarded the Lionel Gelber Prize for the best book on international relations published in English in 1993. Along with these books, Makiya has written for *The Inde-*



Benjamin Barber

pendent, *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Times*. In October 1992, he acted as the convener of the Human Rights Committee of the Iraqi National Congress, a transitional parliament based in northern Iraq. He has collaborated on two films for television, the most recent of which exposed for the first time the 1988 campaign of mass murder in northern Iraq known as the Anfal. The film was shown in the U.S. under the title *Saddam’s Killing Fields*, and received the Edward R. Morrow Award for Best Television Documentary on Foreign Affairs in 1992.

Gender, Sexuality, and Cultural Politics: A Graduate Colloquium

The Warren Center, the Graduate School, and the Departments of English and Philosophy are sponsoring an interdisciplinary graduate student conference on gender, sexuality, and cultural politics to be held April 18–19, 2003, at the Wyatt Center on Vanderbilt’s Peabody campus. The conference is co-directed by graduate students Jennifer Bird-Pollan (philosophy) and Tisha Kamlay (English). The symposium will complement this year’s faculty fellows program on the same theme at the Warren Center.

Graduate students from multiple universities representing a va-

riety of disciplines will present papers at the conference. In addition, keynote addresses will be delivered by Lisa Duggan, the 2002/2003 William S. Vaughn Visiting Fellow at the Warren Center and associate professor of history and American studies at New York University, and Uma Narayan, associate professor of philosophy and director of the Women’s Studies Program at Vas-sar College.

This is the second year that the Warren Center has played a central role in sponsoring a graduate student symposium linked to the theme of the annual fellows program. Last spring’s con-

ference, entitled “Limits of the Past: The Human Sciences and the Turn to Memory” brought thirty-eight junior scholars from twenty-eight research universities to Vanderbilt for the two-day conference. Richard King, the 2001/2002 William S. Vaughn Visiting Fellow and professor of history at the University of Nottingham, and Liliana Weissberg, the Joseph B. Glossberg Term Chair in the Humanities at the University of Pennsylvania, presented keynote addresses.

Further information on this year’s program will be available on the Warren Center’s website during the spring semester.

“Race and Wealth Disparity in 21st-Century America” Lecture Series

The Warren Center and the Vanderbilt Law School are cosponsoring a research circle entitled “Race and Wealth Disparity in 21st-Century America.” The project is funded by the Ford Foundation and directed by Beverly Moran, professor of law and sociology at Vanderbilt University. Members of the research circle are working to bridge the gap between their separate disciplines by sharing each field’s unique insights and methods with one another and with the general public, through a series of private workshops and public lectures, as well as the development of teaching materials for use in the classroom. Participants in the program include faculty members from five colleges within Vanderbilt University (College of Arts and Science, Law School, School of Medicine, Owen School of Management, and Peabody College), Fisk University, Meharry Medical Center, and Tennessee State University. Also participating in the program is the executive director of the Tennessee Network for Community Economic Development, a not-for-profit organization committed to increasing asset acquisition among the working poor.

The first public lecture resulting from the work of the research circle was presented by Cecelia Tichi, William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of English at Vanderbilt on November 7th. Her lecture was entitled “White Collar Blues: Movin’ On in the New Gilded Age.”

The series will continue in the spring term. Bruce Barry, Brownlee O. Currey Associate Professor of Management and associate professor of sociology at Vanderbilt will present a lecture on February 6th at 4:10 p.m. at the Vanderbilt Law School. His lecture is entitled “Corporatism and Inequality: The Race to the Bottom (Line).” On Thursday, February 27th at 4:10 p.m., Anne Demo, assistant professor of communication studies will speak on “Communities in Conflict: Labor and Mobility in an Anglo Hamlet.” Professor Demo’s talk will also be held at

the Vanderbilt Law School. Later in the spring term, Edward Fischer, associate professor of anthropology and director of the Center for Latin American and Iberian Studies, will give a public lecture. More details regarding his talk will be forthcoming.

The series of public lectures by members of the research circle will continue in the fall semester of 2003.



This year’s Harry C. Howard Jr. lecturer was Kay Redfield Jamison, professor of psychiatry, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and Honorary Professor of English, University of St. Andrews (Scotland). Her lecture, delivered on October 17th, was entitled “A Life in Moods: Personal and Professional Perspectives on Mental Illness.”

Warren Center Fellows, 2002/2003



First row: José Medina, John Sloop, Diane Perpich; second row: Holly Tucker, Brooke Ackerly, Kathryn Schwarz, Carolyn Dever, Lisa Duggan; last row: Katherine Crawford, Lynn Enterline.

THE ROBERT PENN WARREN CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES

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Statement of Purpose

Established under the sponsorship of the College of Arts and Science in 1987 and renamed the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities in 1989, the Center promotes interdisciplinary research and study in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Members of the Vanderbilt community representing a wide variety of specializa-

tions take part in the Warren Center's programs, which are designed to intensify and increase interdisciplinary discussion of academic, social, and cultural issues.

Vanderbilt University is committed to principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action.

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