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AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

By Monica J. Casper— Director, Women's and Gender Studies

THE F WORD: FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

When WGS Associate Director Shubhra Sharma proposed this issue of *The F Word* I was hesitant. I had wanted to produce an issue on fun or fashion, lighthearted topics that might take our minds off disturbing global conundrums and conflicts, or on firsts, given the heated, momentous race between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama for the Democratic nomination.

Lately, I've been feeling just a little too fatigued (another F word) by current events including the relentless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, misogynistic Hillary-bashing in the media, and my own research on infant mortality, or what I conceptualize as the social production of dead babies. Besides, what could I say about feminist pedagogy that has not already been said eloquently by scholars like bell hooks and the editors and writers at *Feminist Teacher*, *Transformations*, and other progressive journals?

But something happened while I was putting off writing this essay: I showed a film in my course "Disability and Society" on disabled war veterans. For the first time in U.S. history, 90% of troops will survive their injuries. These men and women are returning home profoundly changed, affected by amputations, brain injuries, PTSD, and other traumas. HBO's *Alive Day Memories*, produced and narrated by James Gandolfini, chronicles the "alive days" (the day on which a vet is injured but does not die) of ten people.

As I watched my students watching this moving, troubling film, I

thought about the many ways in which I bring the body, both whole and in pieces, into the classroom. And how my own embodiment and my interest in human bodies shapes the intellectual and pedagogical work I do. While injured vets might not seem like an explicitly feminist issue, thinking about the broken bodies of war speaks directly to health, justice, power, inequality, and gender. It also allows students to locate themselves and their peers (many of the returning vets are still in their early 20s) in a

larger political context.

Years ago in a course at UC Santa Cruz called "Body and Society", I shared with my students images of both my grapefruit-sized ovarian cyst and, a few months later, my embryo in utero which is now a who—a feisty, sassy, lovely six-year old. It was initially strange (yet fascinating, they reported) for my students to pass around images of these interior "parasites" on my reproductive organs. But the grainy pictures helped situate readings on reproductive health in a "real life" context, and in an actual person.

I have also brought my children to class at one time or another, typically

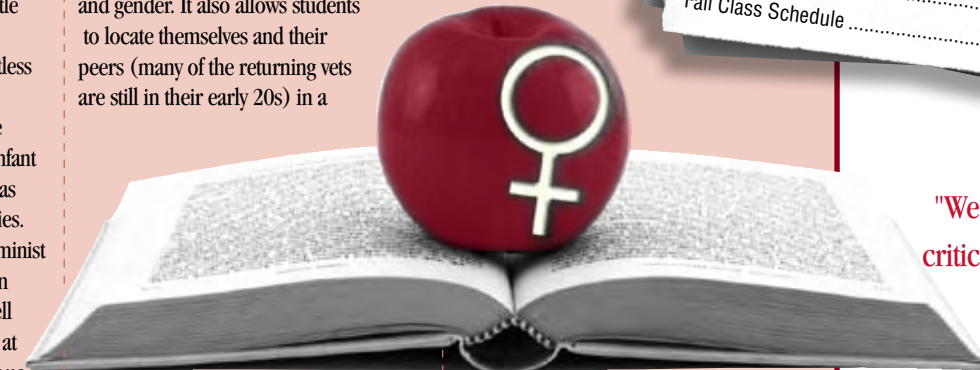
when my carefully crafted "house of cards" of child-care and social support tumbles down. There's a pedagogical lesson evinced by the presence of these small bodies in the classroom: if you have kids and a job, life is a balancing

act that is never quite in balance. Given that most of my women students and at least half of my men students state a future desire to become parents, I believe these are valuable life lessons.

These experiences in the classroom are instances of feminist pedagogy. I could share other stories about it as well. But in the end, what I want to say is this: Feminist pedagogy is not a thing; it is a practice and a perspective. It is not a topic or theme, like "gender in the military", but a way of being in the classroom as an embodied, politically engaged human being. It is about being in love with ideas, with students, and with the project of educating for a better world. ☐

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"We must be willing to critically examine anew the tensions that arise when we simultaneously try to educate in such a way as to ensure the progression of a liberatory feminist movement and work to create a respected place for feminist scholarship within academic institutions."

—bell hooks in *Talking Back: Thinking Black, Thinking Feminist*



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**P**edagogy is the art of teaching, and the challenge of teaching is to find the most effective ways to engage students in the learning process. To share one's passion for a particular topic or area of study with students who are in class only to satisfy a requirement, or because nothing else would fit into their schedules, can be daunting and sometimes frustrating. Adding feminism to the ordinary challenges of teaching would send anyone to the library for consultation with feminist scholars, such as bell hooks, Carole Gilligan, Nancy Chodorow, Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, to name a few. While their insights are helpful, several issues need to be kept in mind when entering the classroom.

Feminist pedagogy requires that students deconstruct the assumptions with which they have been inculturated for 18-22 years. These assumptions in our society have an essentially heteronormative patriarchal foundation. The students' gender identities have been formed on this basis and feminist pedagogy asks students to try on a different perspective when considering knowledge about the world in which they live and their places in it. When questions posed to the class consider that the building blocks of the world they know are not the only possibilities, students become noticeably uneasy and quiet or even dismissive. They can listen, but not believe, or they can listen and reconsider what they have long accepted as conventional wisdom. Challenges to the status quo seem subversive and revolutionary, which contributes to the disquiet.

Essential to feminist pedagogy is finding a way to overcome resistance to trying on a new view. Feminists are not necessarily whiney, discontents who would rather be men and who enjoy being obstreperous and unpleasant. A feminist perspective does, however, involve criticism of institutions and assumptions that have

denied women equal access to opportunities and resources that are afforded to men. Furthermore, there is the fact that feminist perspectives intersect with issues of race, socio-economic status, social control, and fundamental rights. The deconstruction going on at this point in the classroom is approaching major proportions, and notions of social justice start creeping onto the scene. The teacher can easily ask questions that seem simplistic, but to which the answers constitute a major redefining of society and the public good. Who makes the laws and sets policies? What are their motives and interests? Whom do the lawmakers represent? How do laws and policies impact individuals, groups, and nations? Are there transnational and/or global connections to be made regarding feminist issues? How do social relationships work in a particular culture and how do they impact laws, policies, and expectations? The questions are never-ending and often unanswerable in simple or complete forms.

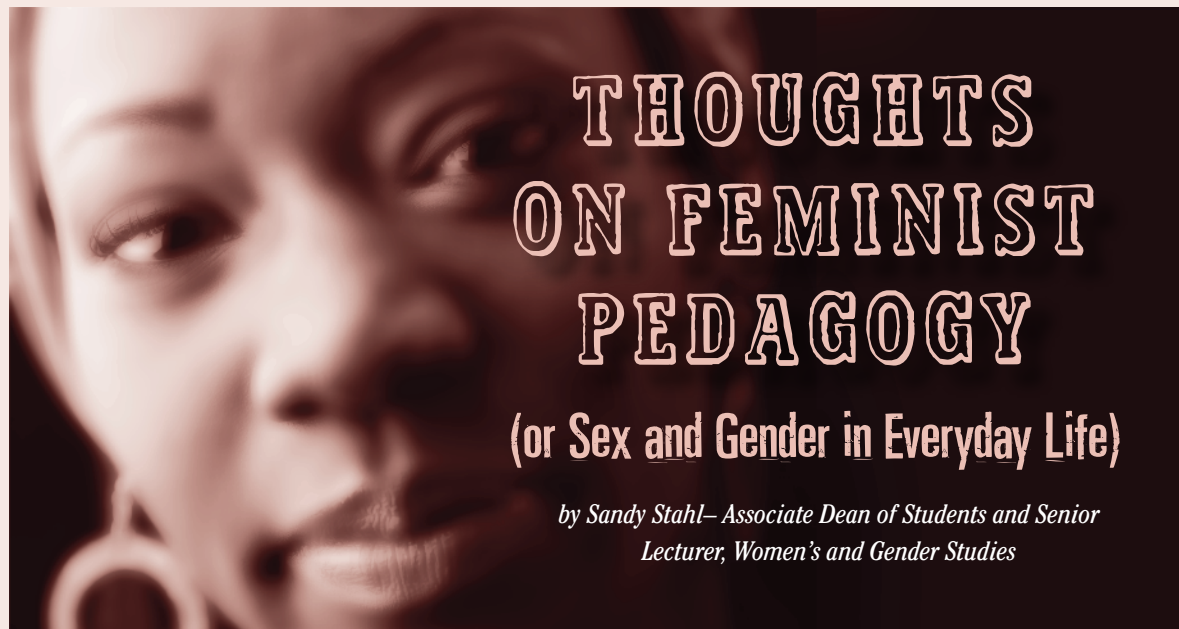
What becomes clear is this: there is a social power structure that has been evolving, and women and other groups who have been traditionally excluded from its construction now expect

to be part of restructuring. Power and authority are being challenged, and this creates feelings of discomfort in generally well-behaved college students. So, if the power structure is being challenged, can't the teacher model this phenomenon? Feminist pedagogy advises that a more egalitarian classroom is the preferred model. Faculty and students can engage in an educational partnership in which all are learners and all have something to teach. Personal experience informs analysis of issues and evaluation of problems.

A most effective way of managing this strategy is to have students engage in some sort of experiential learning project that will link textbook theory and information to real world situations. Something as simple as tutoring a child after school can open a new vista onto gender identity development and manifestation. Working in a women's shelter can cause a student to understand why women don't leave abusive spouses and boyfriends. Polling restaurant managers about allowing nursing mothers to be customers can lead to lobbying efforts with the state legislature on behalf of a women's health agency. Working with a group that is trying to

raise awareness about violence against women or women's health issues often illustrates biases that permeate social and economic institutions.

What comes of feminist teaching strategies? Critical thinking skills, recognition of the politics of knowledge, engaged citizenship, enlightenment, and a desire to initiate social change along with shock, outrage, and disbelief—all of these can develop in the classroom dialogue between and among students and teachers. Students also begin to hone their sense of fairness and justice and to think about how they want their relationships and lives structured after they leave college. Prejudice and discrimination support a world without social justice, a world in which the haves and have-nots are clearly visible. Challenging sexism, racism, classism, and other -isms supports development of a more equitable learning environment and empowers both students and faculty. Students discover from wrestling with challenges to their assumptions that choices they make beyond their college courses demonstrate their value systems, their prejudices, and their attitudes about sex and gender in everyday life. Therein lies the essence of feminist pedagogy. ■



# THOUGHTS ON FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

(or Sex and Gender in Everyday Life)

by Sandy Stahl—Associate Dean of Students and Senior Lecturer, Women's and Gender Studies

## Doing Philosophy, Doing Feminism

By Sarah Hansen—Doctoral student in Philosophy

**P**hilosophy as a discipline is especially conducive to the fostering of "feminist classrooms." Not only do philosophical questions lie behind many issues in gender and sexuality, but also the practice of asking these questions involves challenging assumptions and supporting open and democratic dialogue. In the classes I teach, I try to let the connections between the principles of philosophy and the principles of feminism unfold. Although, as a graduate student, I am allowed to teach only 100-level courses, I find that introductory classes are a great space to watch this happen. In my "Introduction to Philosophy" course, students read part of Simone de Beauvoir's

classic *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir's text asks students to reflect on gendered dynamics of philosophical concepts like experience, freedom and self-hood as they apply to their own lives. *The Second Sex* also asks students to challenge the sexist assumptions behind many traditional philosophical treatments of "humanity" and "truth." I take self-reflection and the practice of critique to be an important part of being introduced to a discipline and an essential part of embodying feminist ideals. Through reading Beauvoir and other feminist theorists, I ask my students to consider that, in doing philosophy, we also do feminism. ■

## EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO SHAPE THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

By Claire King—Assistant Professor, Communication Studies

**A** key aspect of feminist pedagogy is enabling students to feel agency in the classroom and to feel secure in their voices. In addition to encouraging discussion and offering group work to offset the rather one-sided nature of lecturing, I ask students to contribute to course materials. For example, I have asked students to craft sample exam questions, lead discussions, prepare study or readings guides, and teach

particular lessons. Asking students to participate not only in the creation of knowledge but also in the very construction of our class activities and materials offers them a sense of investment in and engagement with the class. When, for instance, a student sees his/her sample exam question appear on an actual exam for the class, he/she may begin to experience the weight of his/her insights and ideas. ■

"A problem-posing education is one where men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation."

-Paolo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*



## FREE TO BE 'THEY' AND 'WE'?

Nicole Seymour—Ph.D. candidate in English

**I**n Spring 2007, I had the opportunity to teach my first course in literary theory. I designed it around eco-criticism and queer theory, and divided up the semester accordingly. When it came time to teach queer theory, I realized that I faced a problem I hadn't faced earlier in the semester: what pronouns to use. I had had no compunction about saying such things as, "As humans, *we* have separated ourselves from the landscape," or "How does this text teach us about *our* relationship to nature?"

I had assumed – and was vindicated in this assumption – that my students had opinions and insights about the connection between humans and nature (be they self-identified "environmentalists" or not). But I couldn't assume much about my students' relationship to marginal sexuality, or to theories about sexuality. Or, at least, I didn't *want* to. Statistically, it might be safe to guess that most of my students were heterosexual. But here's where heterosexism creeps in insidiously: it not only asks us to assume that all people in a given situation are heterosexual, it also asks that we treat these people as if they enjoy being held to the norms thereof – to assume that the girls want to be considered attractive to the boys, that the boys should be macho and authoritative, that everyone is interested in upholding the dominance of heterosexuality over minority sexualities.

But this left me in quite a quandary. How could I proceed without assuming anything? Literally, what words should I use? If I said something along the lines of, "How might we respond to Nikki Sullivan's summations of queer theory?" would students read that as a queer "we" or a straight "we"? If the first, would I be alienating straight students? (And, I wondered, "Is it ever okay to do so, for the purposes of challenging students?") If the second, would I be further isolating already-isolated queer students? Would anyone have the courage to speak up and say, "From my perspective of [fill-in-the-blank], I think...?"

I worried about all this. I worried that saying "they" when referring to marginalized persons would reinforce a sense of their difference for students who couldn't directly relate. But I worried too, that grouping my students along with marginalized persons was an inauthentic move. I worried, in short, that just my smallest choices of pronouns would have earth-shattering consequences.

I never solved this dilemma. I could never decide when to refer to queer theorists as "us" or "them;" I could never decide when to speak of our class as a collective and when to speak of us as individuals. And so I vacillated. I jumped back and forth between "us" and "them" and "you" and "me" and "they" and "people" and "queer people" and "straight people" and "everyone." Maybe some days my students thought I was queer. Maybe other days they thought I was straight. Maybe some days they wondered about themselves. I have no idea.

But the experience reminded me of something we (again with the we!) as teachers should never forget: that the politics of identification in the classroom are bound up with the role of the teacher. No matter how much we may attempt to decenter our authority in the classroom, to make learning a collaborative space, students will usually look to us to set the norms of the conversation. And so, perhaps the task is to make manifest those settings: to actually build discussions around the words we use, why we use them, and what things those words assume. I can't think of a better way to teach queer theory – or to teach anything as a feminist. ■



# GLOBALIZATION, PEDAGOGICALLY SPEAKING

By Shubhra Sharma—Associate Director and Senior Lecturer  
Women's and Gender Studies

In my course WGS: 150, Sex and Gender in Everyday Life, as part of our discussion of globalization, I showed “The New Rulers of the World,” a five-part documentary available at YouTube.com. John Pilger, an investigative reporter from Britain, authored the eye-opening film. The images of women working 30-40 hour shifts to produce boxer shorts for Gap Incorporated in sauna-like factories in Indonesia hit hard for most viewers. Even more disturbing is a little known fact, detailed in the documentary, that economic globalization in Indonesia in the 1960s was accompanied by genocide. The involvement of corporate giants like American Express and General Motors, international institutions like World Bank and the IMF, and the militaries/governments of Britain, the United States, and Indonesia, in the genocide of millions of Indonesians for the sake of “capitalist progress” was a stunning revelation of the “dark side” of globalization.

I checked in with students between showing the documentary and regarding the images they saw and the facts they learned. “Shocking,” “Unbelievable,” “Sad,” were common reactions. But there were a few skeptics who claimed “bias” in Pilger’s telling of this story of globalization. The implication was that without Gap, the women in Indonesia would have no work and then what—starvation? If Gap is the only means to survival for a majority of Indonesians then so be it (or so it is). Should we simply say to those women in sweatshops, “put up or shut up”? In doing so, we would “allow” the logic of global capital to become undeniable and

all-powerful.

For me, reactions to the film also offered a pedagogical moment, undeniably. The question was how to address both “pity” and “skepticism” in an American undergraduate classroom vis-à-vis a group of women workers in Indonesia, laboring for three pennies an hour for an American corporate giant like Gap. This is also a question of positionality—why/how do we position ourselves and “others” (people, issues) in particular ways? To put it differently: is the articulation in response to the documentary, “if you have a heart the size of a jelly bean, you should feel pity for the women,” really so different from another articulation “that is how things are—I need my clothes...and at least (they) have a job...” I see both articulations as “position-statements” that also demonstrate to me an abdication of responsibility. These “position statements” contrast with a more rigorous cross-cultural analysis of globalization, which is especially desirable when the process affects all of us (in the U.S. and Indonesia) so personally.

How then do I address such abdication—because address it I must—not because it is only feminist to do so (consider human rights and social justice) but given the definitions of globalization we shared in class before watching the documentary. We all seemed to agree on globalization as a process of integrating the world (also a Wikipedia view of globalization). It is a definition that we all intuitively liked but that somehow came

to be at stark odds with the Pilger documentary. Our reactions to the documentary, also divergent among ourselves, were as impersonal as our choice of the definition of globalization. In other words, how do we bridge the gap (pun intended) between definitions and actual meanings (of globalization)? If “globalization” is indeed about the world becoming ONE, then how do we investigate the social, political, and cultural processes that we claim promote such oneness of the world? Is “integration” a specific modality of globalization and, if so, what are the others? Again, these are all questions about positionality. Why do we want or feel the need to call globalization “integrative” and not “divisive,” I ask my students and myself. Then again, if it is divisive, how do we conceptualize possibilities of such a

process becoming integrative while accounting for its divisive tendencies, as seen in the Pilger documentary?

When I asked the questions of my students, I saw signs of some comprehension, but it was also marked by confusion. I stopped for 30 seconds then said, “Ok, everyone stand up.” Fearful and unsure of what the real import of the command was, the students slowly rose to their feet. But they all relaxed visibly when I asked them to change their positions, literally—meaning, sit where they had never sat before in the classroom. By moving the students around geographically in class, I also hoped to get them to toy with changing their intellectual positions regarding globalization and its effects across

cultures. The premise of the seemingly innocuous exercise was that thinking differently from the way we usually think may sometimes require moving and shifting—whether from the back of the classroom to the front of the classroom or from a WGS: 150 classroom at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN, in the United States, to a women’s-only sweatshop in Indonesia where the Gap brand of men’s boxer shorts are made.

The question then is: can we use our discomfort with “facts” productively? Further, can we in spite of ourselves and our culturally privileged standpoints, accept, if not entirely identify with, the not so culturally privileged standpoints of people “elsewhere”? After all, in the context of globalization, “integration” can be personalized to also mean a relationship. Whether we like it or not,

globalization has created cross-cultural relationships between and among governments, businesses, and most importantly, people. Whether we like it or not, we are also ethically invested in such relationships. As consumers of Gap clothing (I confess to owning more than a few Gap products), we are implicated in the unequal practices through which global capital makes its worldly rounds and in the histories of political and economic aggrandizement in the service

of a powerful few, which is comprised of both countries and corporations.

Knowledge is power. This we know. Knowing what we now know about the politics of globalization in one country (Indonesia), what do we do? Or rather, so what? We have a choice either to position ourselves as social critics, if you will, or to just change ourselves. Maybe we can petition Gap to institute and monitor fair working practices in countries like Indonesia, or we can stop wearing Gap clothing altogether—a radical step, indeed. Maybe we can also show support for labor rights in Indonesia that have positioned themselves on the side of the workers and towards making global capital (and its protagonists) accountable to the workers. Either way, we have to make a choice regarding our positionality and its implications for others in the context of globalization. This is important because we cannot ignore facts about globalization—especially when these are undesirable or shocking. Globalization may be a topic for discussion in a college classroom but it is also a lived reality for those affected by it. Monica Casper says it well in her introduction to this newsletter that feminist pedagogy is not a thing or perspective but a way of being in the classroom. The only way I know how to be in the classroom is to draw connections between Nashville and Indonesia, between different groups of women, between corporations and laborers. It is important for me that I keep bringing “culture” home rather than just treating it as an Other. ■

\* Thanks to Lisa Grote for suggesting the documentary for our class.

## Continuing the Classroom Conversation

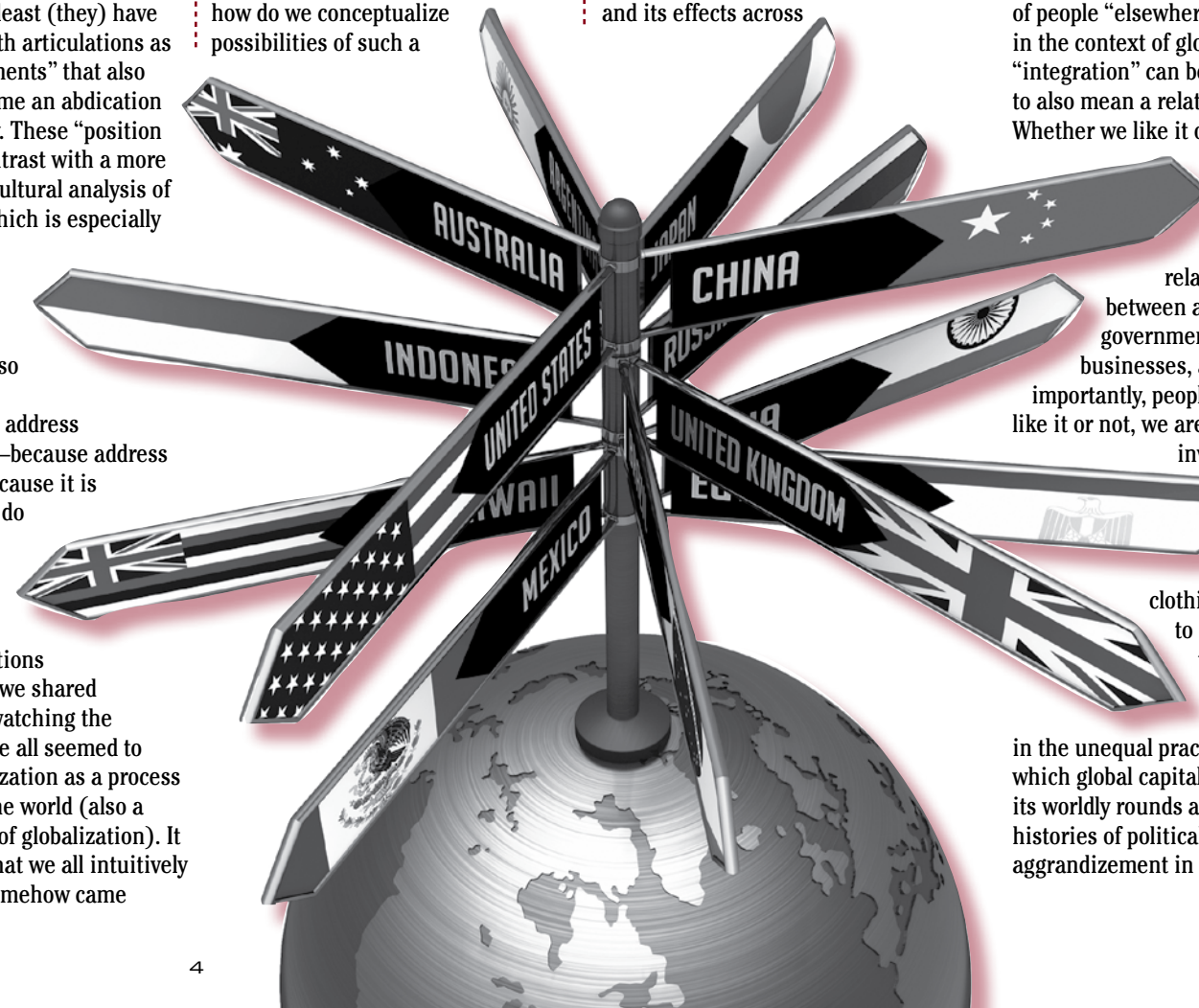
By Haley Swenson  
Women's and Gender Studies major, class of 2008

As a co-editor of The F Word, I had the chance to read Shubhra’s thoughts about globalization and the difficulty she faced in preventing her class from thinking of women in Indonesia as the Other well in advance of the publication of the piece. It resonated with many issues I have been working through intellectually as a second-semester senior. As her piece makes clear, Shubhra’s belief in feminist pedagogy leads her to focus as much on her students’ responses to information she shares with them as on the information itself. In all the classes I have taken at Vanderbilt as an undergraduate, it has become increasingly clear how many different types of teaching philosophies my professors have embraced. But the classes I have taken to fulfill the requirements of my Women’s and Gender Studies major have presented me again and again with professors who truly value my experience with the material they teach and believe conversation is an essential part of the learning process. I emailed Shubhra my response to the article, not because I wanted her to change anything in it, but simply because I benefit from bouncing ideas off of my instructors. I felt comfortable continuing this dialogue, because I knew Shubhra would be interested to know how I, even as an undergraduate, was making sense of the things she discussed in her piece. She thought it would be a good idea to print my response right next to her original piece to help illustrate just how essential dialogue between students and instructors is to feminist pedagogy. Here is what I wrote to her:

When you mentioned some students reacting to the film by saying these women wouldn’t have jobs at all if it weren’t for the exploitative corporations, I was reminded of this quote by Herbert Marcuse: “The question is no longer: how can the individual satisfy his own needs without hurting others, but rather: how can he satisfy his needs without hurting himself, without re-producing, through his aspirations and satisfactions, his dependence on an exploitative apparatus which, in satisfying his needs, perpetuates his servitude?”

I particularly liked this quote after reading your piece, because it’s all about positionality, isn’t it? The first question, which Marcuse dismisses, is from the point of view of the corporation, or from the U.S. consumer buying Gap products, and the Indonesian women would still be the “other” to us. It’s the sort of question spurned by pity and by privilege, by divisions. The first position only gets you as far as, “How can I do this without hurting other people so much?” Or on the flip side, for the student who sees Gap as doing these women a favor in some sense, “Even if I hurt them, isn’t that offset by the fact that I’m also doing them a bit of a favor?” These two questions keep “us” as U.S. students or consumers as subjects and Indonesian workers in place as the distant “other.”

However, the question Marcuse proposes we ask ourselves, while it could also be asked by the U.S. consumer, is also from a point of view of the women in Indonesia. It unites the U.S. consumer with the Indonesian workers in aspiring to overcome the “choices” prescribed to us by neocapitalism, which end up trapping us rather than liberating us. It makes it clear that the true freedom we should be aspiring to is the freedom to reject both extreme poverty and being exploited, to reject both exploiting others and denying ourselves consumer choices, to resist being forced to choose one of these bad options or the other. I think asking this question requires the state of mind you talk about in your piece, in which we as U.S. students stop thinking of ourselves as somehow outside or immune to the conditions affecting Gap employees in Indonesia. Marcuse’s suggestion allows for an understanding of emancipation which is so much deeper than the first, and it encourages integration instead of division. ■







Julie Fesmire with her WGS: 271 (Feminist Legal Theory) students.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

By Julie Fesmire—Senior Lecturer in Women's and Gender Studies

On various occasions, I have been asked to explain my philosophy of teaching. And sometimes I manage to sound quite articulate. Most of my attempts to describe feminist pedagogy, however, seem vague and inadequate. All I can really say is that I am a feminist and I love having conversations with my students.

As any of them will tell you, I'm into the significance of titles. I have the students analyze why an author chooses one title over possible others, and I want them to carefully construct titles for their own work which precisely reflect what they believe to be the essence of their arguments. *The Color Purple* reflects Alice Walker's argument for multiple feminisms, specifically in her definition of womanist: womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. Hélène Cixous, in "Laugh of the Medusa," challenges the phallogocentric construction of feminine by giving her Medusa beauty and a voice. James Boyd White's study *When Words Lose their Meaning* examines a number of texts at the moment when a rhetorical breakdown requires characters to construct new cultural values.

Changing the name of our program from Women's Studies to Women's and Gender Studies was not meant to signal a radical substantive change in our curriculum, but to reflect more accurately the content and emphasis of our various courses. Our newsletter needed a similar facelift. Core faculty and staff were unanimously in agreement when our director proposed *The F Word*. But what does that change signify?

We all know the traditional f-word. There was a time when I would have been very careful to neither speak nor write this word in an academic setting, except under certain circumstances. A number of years ago, I had a writing class see Deb Margolin in a production of her play *Critical Mass* that contains a fascinating monologue, which can only be called "fuck beauty." Half my students were absolutely horrified and the other half were thrilled that they were going to be allowed to use the f-word in a college essay. For a variety of reasons, the shock value of that word has lessened over time.

As a result of the backlash against feminism, we now have a new f-word. I constantly encounter students who react violently at even a casual mention of the word "feminist" (which they apparently hear as "feminazi"). They adamantly disavow any allegiance to feminist causes yet, at the same time, argue for the political, legal, economic, and social equality of women and minorities. When I share with students in a comparative literature class Sarah Pomeroy's study of women in classical antiquity (*Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*), students accept the argument as intelligent literary criticism. When I do the same in a WGS class, a number of students complain that I am shoving my personal political agenda down their throats. Last year, one of the students in my first-year seminar, "Women in Law and Literature" (hardly a provocative, or even interesting, title—looks like somebody

## ART PROFESSOR LIBBY ROWE'S RECENT EXHIBIT, *PINK: LEARNING FEMININITY*

A VISUAL DISPLAY OF FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

By Libby Rowe

My artistic interests reside in defining and redefining women's issues in ways that are both informational and confrontational, and yet accessible to a diverse audience. In *Pink*, I bring together anatomy lessons with intentionally charged imagery and text to produce a new forum of discussion on what it is to be a woman—physically, socially, and psychologically. I am intrigued by taboo subjects and the general avoidance of their mention. Individual pieces in this series are inspired by stories from women and men relating common misconceptions of the physical mechanics of their body parts, as well as my own experiences in learning how my body and my mind truly work. Other pieces encourage reflection on and reconstruction of accepted social definitions of "feminine", "womanhood", and "equality", and a questioning of who is, and who should be, in control of these definitions.

My most recent work stems from my experience of regularly being

addressed as "Sir" since moving to the South. I have always been a tall woman with short hair, a relatively low voice, and a confident presence. This constant questioning of my femininity leads me to explore the standards of femaleness and the gendered indoctrination systems in place during my childhood. My mother was a product of the fifties. Her mother trained her well. I see the ideals of the fifties feminine identity as an alter ego of sorts to my own feminist existence. Something went awry during my training. Where did she go wrong?

I am interested in engaging my viewer physically as well as visually. Through the performance of a physical act of repeated ritual, as in practicing perfect posture or styling the perfect hairstyle, or of confessed vulnerability, as in exposing a lie, the viewer engages more deeply in the work as well as the ideas behind the work. In addition, each piece changes as the number of participants grows, with the addition of comments, reactions, impressions, or artifacts. Their interaction completes each piece. ■



Practicing Princess



Not a Sir



Transformation

Consider the following two student evaluations of a first-year writing seminar on American women's literature I taught several years ago. Student A writes: "I really enjoyed the class discussions. You started the discussions without telling us what to think. Instead, you inspired us to come up with our own ideas and opinions and reassured us that there was no right or wrong answer. The discussion really made me think about and analyze books like I never have before." Student B states: "Sometimes it felt like instead of having a lesson or lecture the class lead [sic] the class. I would've liked to hear more of Dr. Dicker's interpretation or what she wanted us to take from a certain novel as opposed to others' comments. Class discussion was great, but it would've been helpful to have less opinion and more fact."

As disheartening—and even maddening—as it is to read such contradictory evaluations, I cite these two comments not just to show that students taking the same class respond very differently to the same pedagogy. Rather, these student comments help illustrate my philosophy of teaching, one shaped by feminism. Unlike Student B, who seems to advocate what Paolo Freire labels the banking model of education, I do not see myself as an all-knowing teacher who deposits information into my students' waiting brains. My classroom is a site of exchange and dialogue, a place where academic connection can occur. In "Connected Education for Women," Blythe McVicker Clinchy and her coauthors propose that the instructor in a "connected" classroom should behave more like a midwife than a banker, thereby enabling students to "give birth" to their own ideas. The model of the midwife resonates with me because I see myself as a facilitator, someone who is eager to discover what will be created each day in the classroom.

# TEACHING WITH YOUR MOUTH SHUT

By Rory Dicker—Senior Lecturer, English and Women's and Gender Studies

My belief in a connected classroom does not mean that I abdicate responsibility for the running of my classes. I intentionally design course syllabuses, make and mark quizzes and tests, and grade paper assignments.

In preparing for each class session, I develop questions that will structure and guide the discussion. However, in these discussions I begin by asking students for their reactions and questions and let these comments direct our session. Like Donald L. Finkel, a proponent of student-centered learning, I try to "teach with [my] mouth shut" so that I can focus less on what I have to say and more on the ideas of my students. According to Finkel, students thrive when instructors lecture and talk less. While Finkel warns instructors against the temptation of dictating meanings to students, he doesn't necessarily advocate passivity for the instructor, who must "provide structure and activities to help



Student Matrice Littles presenting material in Monica Casper's course, *Disability and Society*.

his students." Teaching with a shut mouth requires the instructor's engagement, not her domination. This search for an engaged, connected experience in the classroom, a safe space without coercion or domination, is what animates my work as an instructor. ■





# ALUMNAE NEWS

**Stacie R. Furia** (2003) is a doctoral candidate in Sociology (with an emphasis in Women's and Gender Studies) at the University of California, Santa Barbara (a.k.a. Paradise). She completed her dissertation research on women in the military last summer and is currently working on writing up the gigantic undertaking. In order to stay sane (or perhaps because she is insane), Stacie has also decided to ride her bicycle the 545 miles from San Francisco to Los Angeles this June with Aids LifeCycle 7. Feel free to think positive thoughts on both accounts, as she is going to need all the encouragement she can get for each pursuit.

Since finishing her master's in Women's Studies from Texas Woman's University in the summer of 2007, **Mary Jane Philpy** (2005) has been working as the Professional Training Institute Coordinator for Planned Parenthood of North Texas. In this position, she routinely plans professional training events for youth-serving professionals. She also recently became engaged to her long-time mate Clay Dollins and is planning to be married in late 2008 or early 2009.

**Pamela Williams** (2004) is happy to report that she and her husband are expecting their first daughter in early June. They are thrilled to become parents! In June, they will also celebrate their fourth anniversary. She is continuing her master's degree program in Human Resource Development at the University of Illinois. She works full-time for the University of Illinois as a Documentation Specialist on an HR-Payroll functional design team, so she is attending school part-time. She and her husband returned to Vandy so she could attend the Women's Networking conference hosted by the MBA/EMBA programs at the Business School. She encourages everyone to attend next year's conference.

**Jenny Lee** (2003) has recently moved back to Nashville. She will begin attending the Jack Massey Business School at Belmont University in May.

**Sarah Dean** (2007) is excited to finish her first

year of law school in Hawai'i. She is hoping to work with Planned Parenthood there this summer. She is also working in an "eco" store on the weekends that recycles plastic bags and license plates from Hawai'i and sends them to a women's co-op in the Philippines where they are made into purses. The project is eco-friendly and helps over 500 women and their families in the Philippines.

**Lindsay Kee** (1998) received her Master of Professional Writing with a concentration in fiction from the University of Southern California in May 2007. She is currently working on her first novel and is the Program Coordinator for the American Civil Liberties Union of Tennessee. She lives in Nashville with her husband, songwriter Fred Wilhelm, and their cat, Chatter.

CONGRATULATIONS to **Darcy A. Freedman** on her upcoming job. Darcy is a doctoral candidate in the Community Research and Action (CRA) Program at Peabody, and upon completion of her degree, she will also receive the WGS Graduate Certificate in Gender Studies. This fall, she will become Centenary Appointee and Assistant Professor, College of Social Work, University of South Carolina, Columbia. In her words, "My position is specifically focused on examining and addressing the relationship between built and social environments and health through a transdisciplinary approach that emphasizes social justice. I will also affiliate with the Women's Studies Program at USC." Way to go, Darcy! We're proud of you. ■

## WGS STUDENTS START NEW COMMUNITY OUTREACH ORGANIZATION

By Eryn Calliban—Student assistant, Women's and Gender Studies

Connecting Hearts is a new student organization with a focus on empowering women and building connections and partnerships with the larger Nashville community. Connecting Hearts was first inspired through a Women's and Gender Studies class, *Trauma, Literature and Women Writing*, which explores the effects of trauma on the lives of women through narrative.

Central to Connecting Hearts is our partnership with Mending Hearts, a local halfway house for women recovering from substance dependency. Working with Mending Hearts has provided us the wonderful opportunity of taking these class lessons and applying them, by helping women whose lives have been affected by trauma. While all of the women of Mending Hearts are recovering from a form of substance dependency, many too have histories of physical and sexual violence.

Through GED tutoring, as well as life-skills education, we hope to inspire change in the lives of these women—providing them with the tools necessary for success, but most importantly, with the confidence to reach their full potential.

In late March, the artwork of Mending Hearts' accomplished women will be on display in the Sarratt Promenade. This exhibit will not only help celebrate Women's History Month, but will also explore the role of trauma and violence in the lives of women. The reception for this exhibit is **Sunday, March 23 from 4:30-6:30 PM in the Sarratt Promenade**. All persons are welcome and encouraged to attend.

*The Harold S. and Gertrude Vanderbilt Spring Symposium 2008 visiting writers are women who have grown up or lived in lower or working class homes before being vaulted by their literary gifts into the professional strata where they invariably confront feelings of guilt and unworthiness, familial betrayal and abandonment, imposture and fear of detection. Work by these writers inscribes the transformation from and the aftereffects of the condition of poverty—compounded by challenges imposed by family, sexuality, race, religion, and especially gender—as a source of strength and inspiration for women who are propelled by writing to live beyond their beginnings.*

Joy Castro studied literature at Trinity University and Texas A&M University. She is the author of the memoir, *The Truth Book* (Arcade 2005). She teaches at the University of Nebraska and in the Solstice Low-Residency MFA in Creative Writing Program at Pine Manor College. Her honors include the Charles Gordone Award for Poetry and a Frank B. Vogel Scholarship in nonfiction at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and her short fiction and creative nonfiction appear in anthologies and journals such as *North American Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Chelsea*, *Quarterly West*, and *Puerto del Sol*.

Karen Salyer McElmurray's short fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and published in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Alaska Quarterly Review*, and other journals. Her books are *Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven* (a novel), which won the Thomas and Lillie D. Chaffin Award for Appalachian Writing in 2001, and *Surrendered Child: A Birth Mother's Journey* (a memoir of the relinquishment of her son to state-supported adoption in Kentucky in 1973), a National Book Critics Circle Notable Book and the recipient of the Associated Writing Programs Award for Creative Nonfiction in 2003. Her most recent work, a novel entitled *The Motel of the Stars*, will be published in 2008 by Sarabande Books.

Heather Sellers is the author of *Georgia Under Water* (Sarabande 2001), a book of linked stories which won a place in the Barnes and Noble New Discovery Writers Award in Summer 2001. Her first children's book, *Spike*

and *Cubby's Ice Cream Island Adventure!*, illustrated by Amy Young, was published by Henry Holt in October 2004. A poetry collection, *Drinking Girls and Their Dresses*, was published in November, 2002 from Ahsahta Press (Idaho). Her textbook for introductory creative writing students, *The Passionate Beginner*, is just released by Bedford/St. Martins. She is the author of two memoirs on the writing life, *Page after Page: how to start writing and keep writing no matter what!* (Writer's Digest, 2004) and *Chapter After Chapter*. Currently, she is completing a memoir about her experiences with prosopagnosia, or "face blindness."

Dorothy Allison grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, the first child of a fifteen-year-old unwed mother who worked as a waitress. The first member of her family to graduate from high school, Allison attended Florida Presbyterian College on a National Merit Scholarship and in 1979, studied anthropology at the New School for Social Research. She is the author of the chapbook, *The Women Who Hate Me* (1983); the novels, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998); and the short story collection, *Trash* (2002).

## 2008 SPRING SYMPOSIUM BEYOND OUR BEGINNINGS

Women Writers from Lower & Working Class Backgrounds  
March 25-28, 2008, Vanderbilt University

### SYMPOSIUM SCHEDULE

#### Tuesday, March 25

4:00 PM Panel with all Presenters (Bishop Joseph Johnson Center—BJJC)  
5:00 Reception (Robert Penn Warren Center)  
6:00 Reading: Dorothy Allison and Heather Sellers (All Faith Center—AFC)  
7:00 Book Signing & Reception (AFC lounge)

#### Wednesday, March 26

6:00 Reading: Joy Castro and Karen McElmurray (AFC)  
7:00 Book Signing & Reception (AFC Lounge)

#### Thursday, March 27

6:00 Reading/Performance: Minton Sparks (AFC)  
7:00 Signing and Reception (AFC)



## THE FUTURE OF FEMINIST ROMANCE: A REVIEW OF JUNO

*Juno* chronicles one teenager's attempt to navigate an unplanned pregnancy while maintaining her hipster sensibilities. It's been met with critical acclaim and with box office success. Here, sociology doctoral students Heather Talley and George Sanders discuss the film and the future of feminist heterosexual romance.

**Heather:** In the film, Juno's decision to pursue adoption is hers to make. She shares it with Paulie Bleeker, but he is not really invited into the decision making process. Responsibility for contraception seems to have become more shared, but I wonder if you can speak to this expectation that ultimately choices about pregnancy are a woman's to make. In the last couple of years, some self-identified feminist men have voiced concerns that these expectations are in conflict with one another. Does it feel like a conflict to you?

**George:** For me it ultimately comes down to issues of embodiment and intent. As a man I will never truly know what it is like to "feel" pregnant, to carry a baby to term, go through the hormonal shifts, weakened bladder control, weight gain, back aches, vomiting, sleep problems, abstinence from soft cheeses, etc. In short, your body, your choice!

**Heather:** I think you've identified this sentiment that many feminist women are really longing to hear from male partners—a real empathy for what men might not be able to fully understand. Bleeker's deferral to Juno about a lot of things lends something to his appeal. There's that moment in which he responds to Juno's insistence that he's the coolest guy without even trying and he responds "I try really hard actually." In terms of a romantic moment, that's it for me. Bleeker is vulnerable in this really big way, and to me, that's what makes him so desirable. By contrast, we have plenty of examples of films in which men's desirability is marked by their strength or impenetrability. I wonder what it means to have to wrestle with traditional notions of masculinity at the same time that there's clearly a desire for vulnerability in romantic relationships?

**George:** There's a romantic desire for vulnerability? Really? Come on!!! I'm not sure about Paulie. He was of course



artless, earnest, and desirous. But mostly he was present. He was there for Juno. She was going through the toughest time of her life and he made himself and his support fully available. I'm not sure whether or not that's "masculine." That just seems human, compassionate, and good.

**Heather:** Paulie is no Carey Grant, and Juno is no Audrey Hepburn. She's sarcastic. She wears hoodies. She decides. Is Juno the new "it girl" for feminist men interested in romance with women?

**George:** She was a little glib for this feminist man. Which isn't to say that an expansive vocabulary, rapier wit, and boldness isn't extremely attractive. She also likes horror movies and (sorta) punk rock which are conventionally masculine domains. Thus, there were additional points of potential connection. On the other hand, I love yoga and America's Next Top Model and no one's banging down my door—a double standard, perhaps?

**Heather:** Maybe, we're just still working out what feminist romance will look like. Do you think that the popularity of the film

says anything about our desires to see new versions of romance?

**George:** Yes, indeed. I have to say it's nice to have popular representations of the boy trailing the girl. I think a lot of straight boys trail girls, so to see that an attractive, smart, and funny woman finds that attractive is reassuring.

**Heather:** What do you imagine happens for Juno and Paulie after they finish singing that fantastic Moldy Peaches song?

**George:** As with most adolescent love affairs, I think it went swimmingly for one to two years before ending in heart-crushing despair, the consequences of which probably included a lifelong pursuit to overcome a pervasive sense of failure and insecurity, only temporarily addressed with a beaalong rush into partying, sex, alcohol, and a moderate experimentation with drugs before cruising mindlessly into salaried careers, which became the target for all of their pent-up anxieties and fears and low self-estimations.

**Heather:** That sounds about right. ☐

## WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES PROGRAM SPRING 2008 EVENT

### WEDNESDAY APRIL 2ND LOCATION: SARRATT STUDENT CENTER ROOM 189

**Dr. Mary Lou Décosterd**  
of the Lead Life Institute will  
present a keynote address  
in two identical sessions  
at Vanderbilt University on  
Wednesday, April 2, 2008.

The sessions will each run for three hours and will be entitled, *An Evolution of Influence: Women, Leadership and Life*. The sessions are sponsored by the Women's and Gender Studies Program and are intended to:

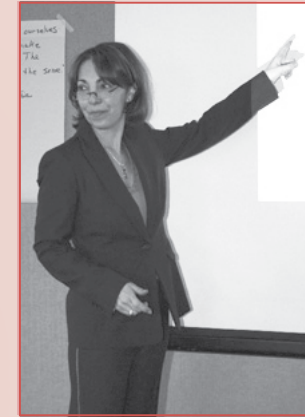
1. Present a broad overview of leadership
2. Recount and validate the leadership contributions of women throughout history to the present day

3. Call attention to the current state of our world and what women leaders have in particular to offer relative to the challenges we all face
4. Understand specific issues women face as leaders and change agents and generate possible avenues to address them
5. Help students make connections between their academic work and their potential future plans in the "real world".

The session format will combine lecture, discussion and experiential exercises.

#### About Registration:

The event is FREE but interested students are required to register for either of the two three-hour sessions. Please email [shubhra.sharma@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:shubhra.sharma@vanderbilt.edu) with your name, major, and the session you are interested in attending (9:30-12:30 OR 1:30-4:30 p.m.).



#### About Dr. Mary Lou Décosterd:

Mary Lou Décosterd is founder and Managing Executive of The Lead Life Institute ([www.leadlifeinstitute.com](http://www.leadlifeinstitute.com)) a learning consultancy offering programs and services to help executives, teams and organizations become their best. Dr. Décosterd has 25 years of experience in organizational development, applied psychology, and university teaching.

Dr. Décosterd has lived and worked in the U.S. and abroad. She is a graduate of The University of Hartford, The University of Oklahoma, and The Fielding Institute. She holds a B.A. in Psychology, Master's degrees in Educational Psychology, Organizational Development and Clinical Psychology, post-master's certification in community psychology, and a Ph.D. in Human Development. She has been recognized by "Who's Who in Teaching" and "Outstanding Women of America."

### WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES FALL 2008 COURSE SCHEDULE

COURSE #	COURSE TITLE	CREDIT HOURS	DAY/TIME	INSTRUCTOR	ROOM
WGS 115F-02	FYS: Tales Told and Retold: From Gilgamesh to Harry Potter	3	MWF 1:10-2:00	Fesmire, J.	BT 305
WGS 115F-03	FYS: Where the Girls Are: American Women's Literature	3	TR 2:35-3:50	Dicker, R.	MEM 117
WGS 150-01	Sex & Gender in Everyday Life	3	MWF 3:10-4:00	Fesmire, J.	BT 305
WGS 150W-01	Sex & Gender in Everyday Life	3	TR 9:35-10:50	Sharma, S.	BT 310
WGS 240-01	Introduction to Women's Health	3	TR 2:35-3:50	Salisbury, M.	FM 209
WGS 249-01	Women and Humor in the Age of TV	3	T 1:10-3:50	Stahl, S.	FM 217
WGS 250-01	Contemporary Women's Movements	3	TR 11:00-12:15	Dicker, R.	BT 306
WGS 272-01	Feminism & Film	3	W 1:10-3:00	Oliver, K.	CL 219
WGS 281-01	Globalization & Policy Making	3	TR 2:35-3:50	Sharma, S.	GA 220H
WGS 288A-01	Internship Training			Casper, M.	
WGS 288B-01	Internship Research			Sharma, S.	
WGS 288C-01	Internship Readings			Sharma, S.	
WGS 289-01	Independent Study			Casper, M.	
WGS 291-01	Senior Seminar: Gender and War	3	W 10:10-12:00	Casper, M.	GA 220H
WGS 294A-01	SpTp: Sleeping with the Enemy: Gender and Trauma	3	R 1:10-3:50	Pierce-Baker, C.	BT 316
WGS 298-01	Honors Research			Casper, M.	
WGS 299-01	Honors Thesis			Casper, M.	
WGS 389-01	Independent Study			Casper, M.	

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

By Julie Fesmire—Senior Lecturer in Women's and Gender Studies

doesn't follow her own teaching instructions), reported that several of her hallmates were quite certain we were up to something nefarious, asking "what do you do in that class?" I suggested that she tell them that we boil bunnies and eat children. It would be interesting to know what those students think of one of my current offerings, "Women Who Kill."

I keep thinking about John Boorman's semi-autobiographical

film, *Hope and Glory*. Neighborhood children have formed a gang that plays in the rubble of WWII London. Their leader invites our protagonist, Billy, to join, but only if he can swear. Billy knows only one swear word and, after much hesitation, reveals it: "Fuck!" The rest of the boys fall silent, almost reverent: "That word is special," says the leader. "That word is only for something important." I believe our f-word is special as well. ☐