

Black feminism

Collins reclaims unheard voices of African-American women

by Karen E. Campbell
Associate Professor of Sociology

On November 6, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins will deliver the Margaret Cuninggim Lecture, an annual endowed lecture on a topic involving women in culture and society.

Collins is known principally for her 1990 book, *Black Feminist Thought*, which I have read and used in a course on Women and Public Policy. I consider *Black Feminist Thought* a very important work, both for sociologists and for students, because it opens the eyes of white feminists (like myself) who have not always been attuned to the ways in which mainstream, white feminism (and sociological attention to feminism) have excluded or marginalized women of color.

This is well-illustrated by a comment made by an African-American woman in the public policy course a few years ago. During a class discussion of feminism, she said, "I always thought feminism was concerned with making it possible for women to be mothers and be employed. Since three generations of women in my family have done that, I didn't see what feminism had to offer me and others like me." I think Patricia Hill Collins' reclamation of feminist voices among African-American women helps both

African-Americans and whites understand what black feminist thought has to offer us all.

I recently interviewed Collins (via e-mail) at the University of Cincinnati, where she is the Charles Phelps Taft Professor of Sociology and Professor of African-American Studies.

Campbell: Early in *Black Feminist Thought* you contest the notion that black feminism can be reduced to 'biological' roots, saying that one need not be either black

or female to be a black feminist. Toward the end of the book, you write that "Black feminist thought as specialized thought reflects the thematic content of African-American women's experience." You also emphasize in your conclusion the importance of experience as a source of wisdom and knowledge. Can white women or black or white men share the experiences of black women sufficiently to contribute meaningfully to black feminist thought?

Collins: I do not think that any other group other than African-American women can share the experiences of black women because no other group actually has those experiences. However, I do think that other groups can examine their OWN experiences in order to develop empathy.

This all has implications for developing knowledge. By living as black women, African-American women bring the uniqueness of experience to the task of crafting black feminist thought. I see BFT as situated knowledge where context counts but where BFT can never be fully developed without coalitions and collaborative relationships with other groups. However, experience is no substitute for analysis. What other groups can bring [are] analysis, skills and commitment to furthering the development of black feminist thought.

Campbell: You express concern (p. 160) about how the changing class structure of African-Americans may be compromising the tradition of activism among black women. First, do you see any organization/movement that is a contemporary analogue to the black women's club movement? Second, do you think that the changing class structure has any effect on the African-American tradition of 'other mothers'? If so, how?

"Moving Beyond Gender: Race, Class and Scientific Knowledge"

is the topic of the 1997 Margaret Cuninggim Lecture by Patricia Hill Collins, who will speak Thursday, November 6 at 7:30 p.m. in Wilson Hall, room 126. The lecture is free and open to the public.



Patricia Hill Collins

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Black feminism

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Collins: These are both big questions. As for the former, I don't see any national organization that is sufficiently matched to current social conditions. Many important, valuable black women's organizations exist on the national level and these organizations are vitally important. I'm just not convinced that we have thought through the political implications of the times that we are in. I see the need for intersectional analyses of black women's issues (those informed by race, class, gender, nation and sexuality as mutually constructing categories of analysis). Political responses would demonstrate this degree of sophistication. To me, we are in a quite different politic — hence the responses must be different.

As for the changing class structure, this is an enormous question. If people are not in contact with one another in other than formal roles in the

“At one point, college campuses were so racially polarized that you had to pick either race or gender — you were in the black student alliance or the feminist collective. Fortunately, those kinds of stark choices have faded somewhat. . . .”

labor market (middle-class black women who supervise working-class black women in secretarial work who both administer to poor black women via social welfare bureaucracies), how can this help but have some effect on all traditions?

Campbell: You describe, in *Black Feminist Thought*, how black women's relationships with one another, their blues tradition in music, and their writings are parts of an alternative world view that creates some “safe spaces” for black women. Do you see new cultural forms (especially in popular music) that continue this creating of safe spaces?

Collins: I definitely do not see black popular music creating such spaces. In a sense, the spaces that I describe in BFT were part of a black civil society that has vanished. The commodification of black culture has changed the social conditions in which black music was created, performed and experienced. What used to be part of a black public sphere has now become part of a highly-commodified general public sphere influenced by market relations.

I think that the task today lies in creating new sorts of “safe spaces” in black civil society and beyond where knowledges like BFT can be developed. The need for such knowledges has not diminished. African-American women face very similar issues today. What seems to be different are the social mechanisms that collectively keep the majority of black women in the United States on the bottom.

In this regard, one interesting connection is the Internet. While I do not have sufficient time to explore the Internet, some of the sites that deal

with African-American women's issues are interesting. In particular, the Million Woman March scheduled for Philadelphia on Oct. 25 would be very difficult to organize through traditional media. To me, electronic resources have potential.

Another cultural form that I find most fascinating (although it too is certainly firmly entrenched in the market relations I describe above) is the work of black women filmmakers. One issue that confronts people today who want to generate alternative knowledge is distribution. With black civil society organized so differently, how do they get their ideas out? Film is an especially powerful medium, especially in reaching people who have been denied literacy.

Campbell: You mention your daughter Valerie in the acknowledgments to *Black Feminist Thought*. In the seven years since its publication, have you seen any changes in U.S. society or in ‘mainstream’ feminism that give you hope and optimism (or despair) for Valerie's future? Could you describe them?

Collins: I am very encouraged by the growing willingness of African-American women and other women not typically thought of as “feminists” to think through the possible meanings of women's issues and gender for them. When I wrote *Black Feminist Thought*, this was neither assumed nor encouraged. At one point, college campuses were so racially polarized that you had to pick either race or gender — you were in the black student alliance or the feminist collective. Fortunately,

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those kinds of stark choices have faded somewhat, and I see more risk-taking on the part of students in general.

I also am optimistic to see the continued good faith efforts expended by many white North American feminists in the academy. Many of these women have been important in getting women's studies started and they should be thanked. Moreover, within this group that still sees the connections between power relations and knowledge produced, there is a recognition that gender as a category of analysis cannot form the sole axis for analyzing women's experiences. These are the people with whom I am happy to work and who I would like to see teaching my daughter.

I am less optimistic about the potential contributions of another category of academics, namely, those who study women, even self-defined feminists. I am especially disturbed by the political implications of a relativist post modernism that offers few directions concerning actual political activism. Those using these frameworks seem either unaware or insensitive to the political implications of much of what they say. They create a climate of doom and gloom. Who needs that?

Campbell: Finally, what projects are you now working on? Any chance that you will tackle the "shifting mosaic" that is black feminist thought (to which you referred in the book's introduction)?

Collins: I have just finished a major book. It's entitled *Fighting Words: Black Women, Critical Social Theory, and the Search for Justice*, to be published by the University of Minnesota Press in fall 1998. It took me six years to write and it grapples with the question of epistemological criteria for critical social theory. I want to know what will keep black feminist thought "oppositional" in the changing intellectual, social and political climate in which black women are situated and in which black feminist thought itself exists. In cutting into this huge question, I had to investigate many of the themes I touch on in this interview. ■■■

Gary Jensen receives Werthan Award

Gary Jensen, professor of sociology, has been named this year's recipient of the Mary Jane Werthan Award, given annually to recognize an individual who has contributed to the advancement of women at Vanderbilt.

The award will be presented Nov. 6 at a ceremony prior to the Margaret Cuninggim Lecture in Wilson Hall, room 126.

Jensen, who served as chair of the sociology department from 1989 to 1996, won praise for changing the face of the department. Under his leadership, the number of women in the department increased and the climate for women and minorities improved. Both the director of the Women's Studies program and the African American Studies program are members of the sociology department.

Karen Campbell, an associate professor of sociology, remembers that when she came to Vanderbilt in 1985, she was one of only two women in the department and the other woman was denied tenure shortly afterward.



GARY JENSEN
Werthan Award winner

"When Gary arrived, however, things really kicked into high gear: we've hired women, blacks, assistant professors, distinguished full professors," Campbell said. "He has helped to energize the graduate program and we have one of the most productive faculties, on a per capita basis, in the country. We are a department that ought to be, in my opinion, a role model for other departments in Arts and Science — in terms of our diversity, productivity, and collegiality. Much of our recent success can be traced to Gary's commitment to equity and to his vision for the department. And all of this from a man so laid back that he built a koi pond in his backyard in his spare time."

Jensen has also been a strong supporter of the Women's Center and of the Women's Studies program. He encouraged Nancy Ransom, former director of the center, to develop a course on gender in society, and authorized her to teach that course until the departmental staff included a faculty member who could take it over.

The award is named in honor of the first woman to serve on the Vanderbilt Board of Trust.

Learning to benefit from painful emotions

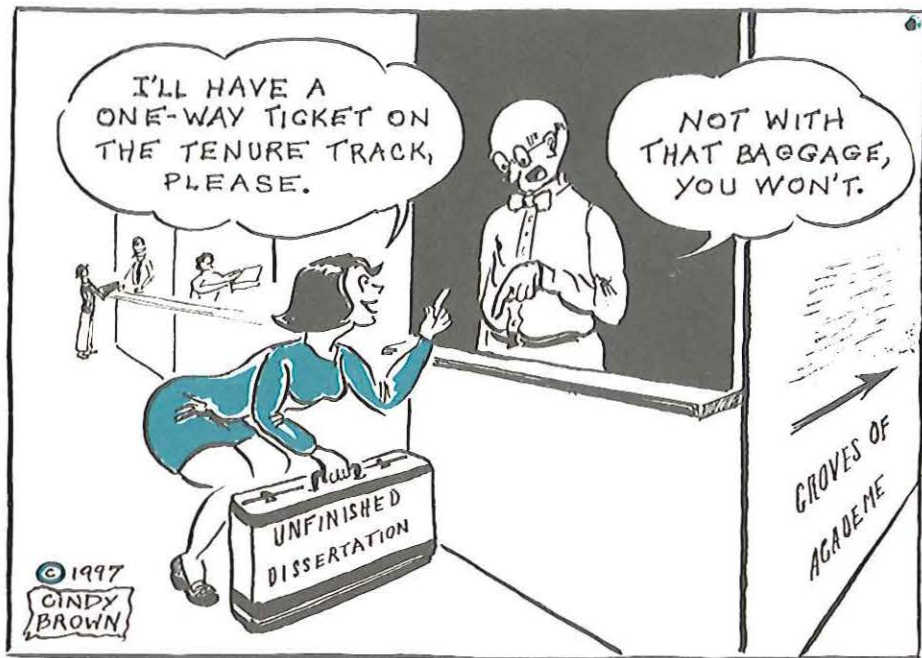
Strategies for transforming the painful emotions and experiences of life into avenues for personal growth will be the focus of a lecture Nov. 4.

Doris Helge, Ph.D., a motivational speaker and author, will present ideas from her latest book, *Transforming Pain into Power: Making the Most of Your Emotions*.

Helge will speak at 7 p.m. in God-

chaux Hall at the School of Nursing. Her appearance is co-sponsored by the Women's Center and the Holistic Nurses Nashville Network.

In her book, Helge argues that dealing with painful feelings is essential to personal success and happiness. She gives advice for using the emotions as tools for understanding and accepting ourselves.



Memories of mutilation:

Somalian stories of female circumcision

by Maureen Needham, Associate Professor, Women Studies/Dance History

On Nov. 12 at 4 p.m. in Wilson Hall 126, Jeanne D'Haem will read stories of Somalian women from her newly released book, *The Last Camel*, which is based on real life experiences and real people she knew in the late 60s. D'Haem joined the Peace Corps and was assigned to an isolated village in Somalia. She thought she had come to be the teacher, but quickly came to understand that she was the student. These stories are funny, compassionate, poignant, emotionally compelling. They made me laugh. They made me cry.

Most of all, these stories are true. They tell of Ashe, daughter of a diplomat who educated her in London so as to protect his little girl from genital mutilation (clitorectomy). When the family returned to live in Somalia after she was a grown woman, Ashe was stoned and scorned as unclean. Her grandmother kidnapped her one night and carried her into the desert where the operation was performed in secret. Ashe was grateful.

They tell of Chamis, the town

prostitute, whose greatest gift to her third husband was to undergo once again the ordeal of her childhood and re-emerge as a virgin. The stories show us independent women who cared for the village outcast, clever women who outwitted the village elders, and friends who gathered for an elaborate party on the day the fierce wildcats decided to mate in their midst.

The stories also tell us something of the author who is brave enough to face down an armed bandit even as she rescues a caged lion dying of thirst. She is courageous (or foolish) enough to wave down a herd of wildebeest galloping straight toward her and deflect them from their stampede. Jeanne D'Haem came to Somalia without a home of her own and found an extended family to receive her in the desert. Her book is a tribute to a village that has since been obliterated by war. She learned from these people, laughed with them and came to love them deeply. And they her.

A reception to meet the author will follow D'Haem's talk, which is sponsored by the Women's Center, Project Dialogue and Women's Studies.

Author shares experiences of women leaders

Laura Liswood, a successful attorney and businesswoman, was curious about the experiences of women political leaders:

- How did they rise to positions of leadership?
- Are their leadership styles different from those of men?
- Are they judged differently from men in politics?

Liswood's curiosity led to a project sponsored by the United Nations in which she interviewed 15 women, all current or former heads of state, and authored a book, *Women World Leaders: Fifteen Great Politicians Tell Their Stories*.

Among those she interviewed were Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain, Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan and Corazon Aquino of the Philippines.



LAURA LISWOOD

In a talk at Vanderbilt Nov. 11, Liswood will discuss what she has learned about women and leadership and her hopes for future political leaders. She will discuss the work of the Women's Leadership Project, a new international group which she helped to organize and now heads. The project aims to promote images of women as leaders, to encourage women and girls to envision themselves as leaders, and to expand the understanding of how leadership is exercised.

Liswood has found that women tend to take different paths to political power than men do. Many women come to power accidentally or reluctantly, after the assassination of their husbands, for example. Others enter politics because of their passion for a particular cause, such as abortion or poverty, while men are more likely to seek office due to personal ambition.

N O V E M B E R

Calendar of Events

Margaret
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Please save and post. Individual flyers for these programs may not be sent.

Tuesday, November 4

Creative Life Planning Group looks at a public television special called "Affluenza," a pernicious epidemic inflicting Americans with symptoms of overwork, shopping, stress and debt. Beth Grantham facilitates discussion. Noon to 1 p.m. Bring your lunch. *Also meets Nov. 11, 18 and 25.*

Pilgrimage to Patagonia: A Soul's Journey. Art exhibit by Rosanne Awbrey runs through December 30. Artist reception today from 5 to 6 p.m. *See article, page 8.*

Transforming Pain Into Power. A talk by Doris Helge, Ph.D., author of a book by the same title, deals with making the most of your emotions. 7 p.m. in Godchaux Hall, School of Nursing. *See article, page 3.*

Thursday, November 6

1997 Margaret Cuninggim Lecture, "Moving Beyond Gender: Race, Class and Scientific Knowledge." Patricia Hill Collins speaks at 7:30 p.m. in Wilson 126. Co-sponsors with the Women's Center are Sociology Department, Women's Studies program and African American Studies. *See interview, page 1.*

Monday, November 10

Book Group meets to discuss *Sister* by A. Manette Ansay. Facilitator will be Ellie Weiss Rosenbloom. New members welcome. 5:15 to 6:15 p.m.

Tuesday, November 11

Women World Leaders: Fifteen Great Politicians Tell Their Stories. Lecture by author Laura A. Liswood, a lawyer and international advocate of women's rights. Co-sponsors with the Women's Center are CABLE and June Anderson Women's Center of MTSU. 7:30 p.m., Wilson 103. *See article, page 4.*

Wednesday, November 12

Memories of Mutilation: Somalian Women Speak of Female Circumcision. Jeanne D'Haem, author of the new book *The Last Camel*, recounts stories of Somalian women she met while working for the Peace Corps. Co-sponsoring her appearance with the Women's Center are Project Dialogue and the Women's Studies program. 4 p.m., Wilson 126. A reception for D'Haem will follow her speech. *See article, page 4.*

Friday, November 14

Dissertation Writers Group. Darlene Panvini, facilitator. 9 to 11 a.m. New members accepted only at the start of each semester.

Monday, November 17

Dark, Hidden Beauty: Black Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Lecture by Carole Marks of Delaware University. 4:10 p.m., Garland 101. Sponsored by the African American Studies program.

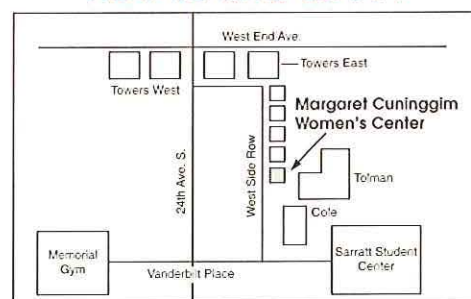
Tuesday, November 18

Freelance Writers Group, a group of women writers who meet monthly to get feedback from other writers and share information. For more information contact Katherine Cruse, facilitator, at 298-3629. 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. New members welcome.

Wednesday, November 19

Women's Center Advisory Board, chaired by Martha Young, will meet at 4:10 p.m. in Branscomb South Private Dining Room.

How to find us . . .

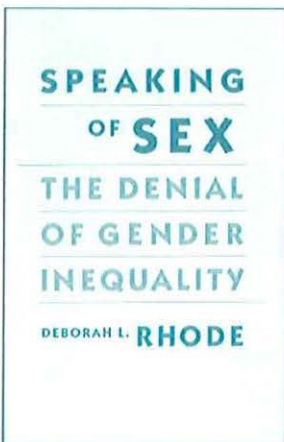


Unless otherwise stated, all programs are held at the Cuninggim Center, Franklin Building, 316 West Side Row. For more information, please call 322-4843.



Despite progress for women, discrimination lingers

Deborah L. Rhode's *Speaking of Sex: The Denial of Gender Inequality* (Harvard University Press, 1997) is a valuable new work on sex discrimination in the United States. The writer is a professor of law and the director of the Keck Center on Legal Ethics at Stanford University. In the past few decades women have made tremendous and very visible progress in many spheres of life, leading many men and women to believe that



women have virtually achieved equality. Some men now feel that it is a disadvantage to be a white male and only about one-quarter of women say they are con-

cerned about gender discrimination.

Rhode illustrates clearly how women are still discriminated against in their public, professional and private lives. She discusses prejudice in connection with job opportunities, salaries, education, the law, sexual violence, the mass media and the unequal distribution of housework and child care. Feminism and women's issues still have negative connotations for many women and men.

Public policies and cultural factors contribute to the lack of equality for females. Gender stereotypes are still very pervasive, even among young children. Many people either discount or attempt to justify gender inequities and blame women's lack of achievement on their own abilities or on choices they have made about their lives. As women usually face an unequal share of household responsibilities, their opportunities in the

Barbara Clarke,
Women's Center
librarian



workplace tend to be restricted.

While most women seek equality with men they do not necessarily want to be just like them; females also want recognition and respect for the values traditionally ascribed to women.

Rhode believes that women will not achieve real gender equity until more Americans recognize that there is still a problem to correct. Many of those who condemn sex discrimination fail to recognize some aspects of it in practice. According to the writer, greater sex equity should result from changes in laws and educational programs, from greater pressure on the mass media, from increased female political participation and modifications of employment policies and practices.

Journalist Terry Poulton has some interesting theories in her new *No Fat Chicks: How Big Business Profits by Making Women Hate Their Bodies - and How to Fight Back* (Carol Publishing Group, 1997). Poulton writes from the point of view of a woman who was fat for most of her life, who tried many diets with varying success until she had her stomach stapled, and who finally came to terms with her shape and size. She feels that she has won the war with her body.

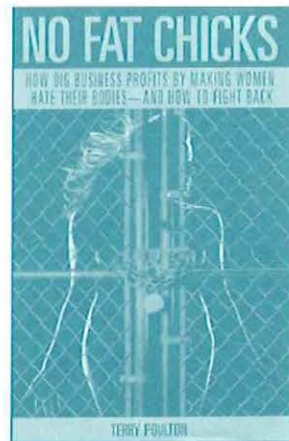
The writer claims that it is not an exaggeration to say that the very profitable diet, health, beauty and fitness businesses are brainwashing women. These industries make billions of dollars because three-quarters of the nation's women are convinced that they are too heavy. Only about

five percent of women conform to what advertisers portray as the ideal body size and shape. Women who are not virtually emaciated are made to feel ashamed of their bodies, and obese women are ridiculed and ostracized.

Poulton explains why it is so difficult for many women to lose weight. The metabolic changes caused by extensive dieting can make it exceedingly difficult to shed pounds; it becomes a vicious cycle. As people age they have a natural tendency to become heavier, especially if they lead sedentary lives.

Fitness and fatness are not mutually exclusive, according to the author, who emphasizes that she is not advocating obesity and lack of exercise; these are usually associated with poor health. Women should accept the body shape that is normal and healthy for them.

Although the pressure to be very thin is still intense, the writer feels that the future looks a little brighter. Millions of baby boomers are entering middle age and gaining weight. Many of these women are disturbed about eating disorders in their daughters or in women they know. Some groups and industries are now fighting back against the pressure to be ultra-thin and to buy the products that are supposed to ensure this. Poulton concludes with suggestions for readers to help end society's emphasis on slenderness and the discrimination against even the moderately heavy. **///**



International women face new freedoms, adjustments at VU

by Nina Kutty (A&S '00)

Imagine you leave your homeland and embark on a journey taking you thousands of miles away to a land of opportunity, wealth and happiness. We often hear of America described this way and to an international audience, this is not an inaccurate portrait of our nation. But this is also not the full picture.

Embarking on this journey forces sacrifices to be made. You are forced to leave everyone you have ever known, the only country you have ever called home and the only culture you have ever lived in. Now, you must make new friends, realize your family is half a world away, call this new land home and make this new culture your life.

Each year, Vanderbilt welcomes a new group of international students, and each year these new students face the hardships and rewards of making a new life in a new place. For women students, there is the additional burden of adjusting to different cultural attitudes toward gender issues.

Shuba Decornez, a graduate student from India, remembers the experience of the initial adjustment to life in America.

"I just didn't have a car and there was no public transportation," says Decornez. "There was a lot of stuff I couldn't do at first. I wasn't able to be independent.

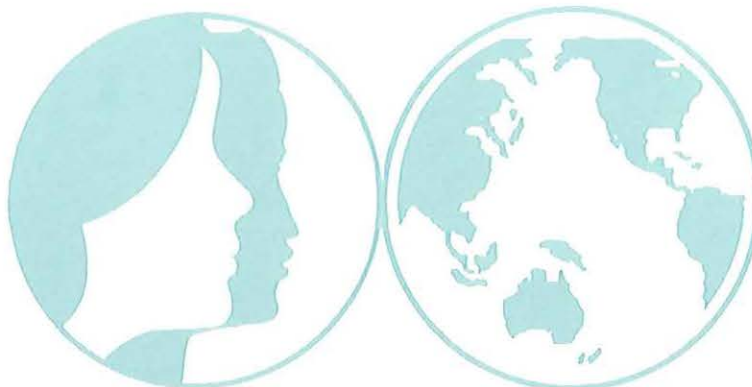
"But the international office here helped a lot, and soon I was able to get around on my own and I adjusted quite nicely after that."

International Student Services is an office at Vanderbilt geared to easing the adjustment of hundreds of students who arrive annually from foreign countries. Among the various programs offered are First Friends, in which a U.S. family and an international student are paired up to dis-

cuss and exchange cultural information while forming friendships.

Another program sponsored by the group is Vanderbilt International Spouses Association (VISA). While married students attend class on campus, their spouses are invited to meet, usually on Mondays, and discuss the hardships of adjustment and learn more about Nashville and the U.S.

"Most of the spouses are women,"



says Jennifer Kemp, graduate assistant for International Student Services. "This gives them something to do and provides an outlet for them to meet other spouses and share things with them.

"We have all kinds of programs here. We've had campus orientation, a safety program, and a cooking class. And, since a lot of the participants have children, there is a day care for them here, too."

While the university does provide excellent opportunities for the students and their families to adjust here, the truth is that the students themselves must do most of the work of learning to adapt to a new culture.

"There are different cultural expectations, both at work and in the social scene, as well," says Darlene Panvini, a Vanderbilt professor who works with international students at the Center for Teaching.

"They have to adjust to a new phase in their life without the help of their family or close friends, and

they're doing it where school, medical and social issues are completely different from what they are used to.

"More often than not, in these students' cultures, there is a great emphasis on the extended family, with lots of brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers to help out. But in America, the emphasis is on the immediate family, and that takes a lot of work to get used to."

But once these obstacles have been successfully conquered, most students feel well at home, and hope to continue living and working in this country.

"There are more job opportunities for international women here compared to their native countries," says Panvini.

"The women enjoy their new freedom and the flexibility American women are lucky enough to take for granted."

Decornez agrees with Panvini for the most part, but sees some things differently.

"I admit that here people are friendlier, but it's misleading. Americans are friendly, but they don't immediately become your best friend. Soon though, you feel comfortable enough to be with them, and the friendships form.

"As far as working here goes, however, I found it quite amazing that women in America aren't paid equally with the men. Depending on who you are in India, you [women] can even be treated better. Plus, maternity leave is much better in India," says Decornez, a new mother.

"But here, there is a lot more independence, and there is great individualism," Decornez continues. "There isn't nearly as much scrutiny from society and your family in America as in India. This has been a good move for me, and thus far, this experience has been very positive and has made me very, very happy." ■■■


Announcements

Paintings reflect artist's pilgrimage

For artist Rosanne Awbrey, painting is an expression of a spiritual journey.

Awbrey, whose work will be on display at the Women's Center during November and December, calls her exhibit "Pilgrimage to Patagonia: A Soul's Journey."

The artist says she has long been fascinated with the remote region of Patagonia, which became "a metaphor for those aspects of my soul which had been ignored — or avoided — in everyday life." She sees her paintings as "a crucial method by which I am able to access, focus on, and obtain insight into the working of my own psyche." Many of the paintings in her exhibit are large-scale oils on canvas which contain varied references to flight: wings, birds, angels and feathers, for example.

Awbrey finds time to paint during the hours away from her job as an academic counselor and testing coordinator at Vanderbilt's Psychological and Counseling Center. Her duties include teaching reading and study skills and effective time management to undergraduate and graduate students. On days off, she can usually be found at her artist's studio in Marathon Village, a North Nashville "artist's colony" where she was originally awarded free studio space in an art contest sponsored by the Metro Arts Commission and the Visual Artists Alliance of Nashville. She has held one-person shows at the Metro Courthouse and Greater Vision Gallery and had one of her works featured on the cover of a TPAC program. Awbrey currently serves as president of the Nashville Artists Guild. She will be honored at a reception at the Women's Center Nov. 4 from 5 to 6 p.m. 



Rosanne Awbrey at her easel.

Women needed for research study

The Women's Physical Activity Study conducted by Dr. Mary A. Nies, associate professor at the School of Nursing, is seeking volunteers.

Women should be healthy, between the ages of 30 and 60, and physically inactive at the start of the study. They also need to have a telephone at home, be willing to receive phone calls at home, and be available for at least one year.

All eligible women will receive a free fitness examination three times over the course of a year. They will also complete several questionnaires regarding their mood and level of physical activity. For taking part in these assessments, participants can earn up to \$30. Some women will be asked to come to Vanderbilt's Clinical Research Center for additional measurements. Those selected can earn up to \$70 more.

For information, call the research office at 343-4055.

Obsessed with your weight?

I am conducting a research project on weight obsession. If you think you are a weight-obsessed woman, I would like to talk with you. I assure you confidentiality. For more information, call Lindsay Kee at 421-6895.



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