“Second Nature” Series Rethinks Politics and Nature by Laura Ephraim (with contributions from Crina Archer)

It was minutes before the final keynote presentation of this winter's graduate student conference, “Second Nature: Rethinking the Natural through Politics,” was set to begin. My fellow conference co-organizers and I felt a familiar nervous excitement: this keynote address, by queer theorist Michael Warner, was the closing event not only of the two-day conference, but of a series of lectures and reading-group discussions on the “Second Nature” theme held throughout Fall 2006 and Winter 2007. Warner, a former Northwestern faculty member, is Professor of English and Director of the Center for Cultural Analysis at Rutgers, and author of the 2000 volume The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life.

As audience members streamed in for Warner’s talk, our concern gradually shifted gears, from “will there be enough people?” to “will there be enough chairs?” And this shift, too, was familiar: enthusiastic audiences had filled the chairs to see talks in the speaker series and the first conference keynote, Jane Bennett (Johns Hopkins University). These prior events helped build a community of graduate students and faculty across the social sciences and humanities, who shared a deepening investment in thinking about second nature and politics.

The organizers of the “Second Nature” series chose this theme when planning began almost two years earlier, in part for the span of issues in political theory (our home discipline) it encompasses. Moreover, we picked this theme for its capacious, interdisciplinary reach. And from the outset, we believed the idea of “second nature” could only be duly interrogated as a political concept if we foregrounded questions of gender, sex, sexuality, race, and class, and explored nature’s empowering and subordinating possibilities for struggles against heteronormative and patriarchal institutions and discourses.

Consequently, we were particularly delighted when Gender Studies joined a roster of humanities and social sciences programs as a cosponsor, supplementing primary sponsorship by the Graduate School and the Alice B. Kaplan Institute for the Humanities. Gender Studies represented a core resource and audience for the “Second Nature” project: a vibrant, interdisciplinary community of

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From the director’s desk

With our second issue of the redesigned Gender Studies newsletter, it’s a pleasure to highlight some exciting developments in the program.

We’ve undertaken a major enhancement of our graduate program this year: through a pilot program in the Northwestern Graduate School, we are inaugurating a new interdisciplinary graduate “cluster” in Gender Studies. This initiative allows us, for the first time, to make fellowship offers to extra-curricular graduate programming.

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In each newsletter, Gender Studies asks a student to introduce a course to our readers. Poornima Yechoor '07 contributed this description of Professor Tessie Liu’s “Race, Gender, and the Politics of Beauty.”

Professor Liu’s “Race, Gender, and the Politics of Beauty” is an upper-level Gender Studies seminar, a lively forum for discussions ranging from feminist viewpoints on beauty in America’s Next Top Model, Professor Liu challenged students to question the complex understandings of definitions of beauty. They are fluid and problematic by questioned of race and gender. She also pushed us to interrogate the origin of these basic definitions and their relevance to daily lives. The course began with an overview of several feminist perspectives on beauty stressing on the “beauty myth” as an oppressive market of patriarchy and others praised beauty culture for allowing women the freedom to express their individuality. The contradictory nature of this scholarship served as a springboard for a rich exchange of ideas and discussions that further nuanced our understanding of beauty culture. The texts we studied included selections on the rise of the cosmetics industry, dolls, beauty pageants in America (both national and ethnic), aesthetics and the sublime, and beauty and performance. Some highlights of the course were screenings of the documentary Paris is Burning and a performance of Alvin Ailey’s Revelations, accompanied by fascinating discussions of how the body fits into discourses of beauty and how race, class, and gender complicate beauty. The seminar format was ideal for the material and allowed all students to discuss and debate their reactions to the texts in a relatively informal, yet rigorous environment. In addition to short responses on course readings and films, the course also required a final paper that challenged students to write an interpretive essay on one of the course’s that was of particular interest to them. As a graduating senior, I took “Race, Gender, and the Politics of Beauty” as the last core of my Undergraduate Gender Studies career, and I am happy to say it contained all the elements of a great class, enabling students to closely confront the complicated nature of ideas of beauty and make beauty relevant to our daily lives.

Difference. On the one hand, former Harvard president Lawrence Summers’s recent call for further research on female scientists’ “natural” inferiority offers a stark contrast to the dangers to feminism of scientific naturalization of gender difference. On the other hand, Anne Fausto-Sterling’s feminism has drawn on the methodologies of the natural sciences to expose the social construction of the two-sex model of sexual ideology and to naturalize a plural model of sexual difference. Disparate academic positions have multiplied, shifting the political landscape of feminism, such as those over minority rights, family structure, and sexual freedoms. Because of these intersections of gender and nature, we as organizers were interested in finding that as the “Second Nature” series progressed, gender, sex, sexuality and race were often intertwined or marginalized, and despite our intent to center them. For instance, tall speaker Thomas Laqueur, whose 1990 book Gender and Sexuality in France: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud profitably contributed to historical understandings of the sexual body, spoke on a theme from his current project, which historicizes concep- tion of death. His talk reconsidered both the radical and democratizing political possi- bilities that art and writing had to curtail and burning the dead. This fruitfully extended his prior scholarship on embodi- ment and its political consequences, but it also represented a shift— in his own work and in the unfolding of our series – away from explicit consideration of the politics of bodies sex. Similarly, there was a distinct shortage of conference paper submissions on gender theories – coloring the array of papers selected and the conversation that ensued during the February 9-10 graduate conference. There were notable exceptions for instance, Ketrdina Chaz (CUNY) provocatively critiques the political utopia of “cyborg rights” by urging some of the circuits across race and gender assumptions structuring popular idealizations of cyborgs. Hauge Korel (UC Berkeley) also foregrounded issues of gender in her incisive reinterpretation of the history of desires on contraception. While gender stayed in the background during much of the conference, however, it served as a significant backdrop to many of the presentations. Some papers sought to legitimate “the human” with other materialities, and others were explicitly or implicitly indebted to feminist theory and/or biology. As a graduating senior, I am happy to say it contained all the elements of a great class, enabling students to closely confront the complicated nature of ideas of beauty and make beauty relevant to our daily lives.
Performance Studies position in the English and Amber Day (Performance Studies) accepted a Culture Conference in Williamsburg, Virginia. Katy Chiles (English) was awarded a Mellon...
A Year in the Life of the Undergraduate Board

by Tiffany Mathison ’10

The Gender Studies Undergraduate Board has had a great year, completing two Leslie A. Hoffman Colloquia. The first colloquium expressed the boards’ fall theme, “TransCinema.” We screened the documentary film, Transparant, which details the lives of females-to-males transgender biological parents, and, the following week, the filmmaker Jules Rosskam gave a presentation. One of the Board’s goals in choosing the theme “TransCinema” was to raise awareness of transgender issues, since they are often overlooked in LGBTQ communities. Indeed, trans-visibility is a concern central to Gender Studies. Rosskam and audience members participated in an impassioned discussion about the representation of trans-people following Rosskam’s talk. In Transparant, Rosskam juxtaposes two views of transgender men on their experience of pregnancy. One man felt uncomfortable during pregnancy, while another described it as the only time he felt at ease in his body. During the colloquium, we discussed how stereotypes are eradicated by allowing both contradictory experiences equal respect and visibility. Gender Studies and English Professor Nick Davis moderated the Rosskam event and contributed meaningfully to the conversation. Northwestern students and audience members had more than enough common cultural experience to engage Rosskam in a lengthy discussion. Some of the most controversial and interesting topics included pregnancy in female-to-male transgender men and the break-down of assumptions about trans-gender men, not to mention assumptions by the medical community. The intriguing conversation continued at the colloquium with a Gender Studies Undergraduate Board-sponsored dessert with students, faculty, and Rosskam.

The Spring Colloquium, Queer in High School: the Integration Question of the 21st Century, followed the theme “Queer and Underage.” It consisted of a panel of six people ranging from Northwestern students to community activists. The main topic of discussion was LGBT-specific high schools. The Colloquium concluded with conversation over dinner with the Gender Studies Undergraduate Board and panel members.

Our second colloquium this year illustrates, the Gender Studies Undergraduate Board-sponsored dessert with students, faculty, and Rosskam.

Cherrie Moraga Extends her Legacy to the Next Generation

by Katy Weseman

Cherrie Moraga delivered an emotional and inspiring reading to a group of students and community members at Northwestern on the evening of January 25, 2007. The event was organized by Alatana, the university’s largest Hispanic/Latino student organization, and was co-sponsored by the Gender Studies Program along with several other academic units and student groups.

Moraga has authored and edited many influential works including the groundbreaking volume of essays This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, which inspired a general movement in Women’s Studies towards more nuanced considerations of race, class, language, and ethnicity. Well known for her foundational contributions to queer, feminist, and women of color struggles, Moraga’s reading at Northwestern joined these broad themes with her present-day personal tensions concerning her gender.

During our two colloquia this year illustrate, the Gender Studies Undergraduate Board and panel members contributed meaningfully to the conversation. Northwestern students and audience members had more than enough common cultural experience to engage Rosskam in a lengthy discussion. Some of the most controversial and interesting topics included pregnancy in female-to-male transgender men and the break-down of assumptions about trans-gender men, not to mention assumptions by the medical community. The intriguing conversation continued at the colloquium with a Gender Studies Undergraduate Board-sponsored dessert with students, faculty, and Rosskam.

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Alumnae/i Updates


Lizzy Ventrell (‘04) is the co-coordinator of the Second Annual Collabora- tive Graduate Conference in Women’s and Gender Studies, “Studying the margins: Constructivist Methods in Feminist Scholarship,” held March 31-April 1 at Emory University. Katherine Zwol (‘01) is working toward her doctorate in Clinical Psychology at the Brown School of Professional Psychology. Her Gender Studies degree is put to use every day as she explores how gender socialization affects cognition, sense of self, personality, psychology practice, and pathologized disorders.

As our two colloquia this year illustrate, the Gender Studies Undergraduate Board provides the opportunity for Gender Studies majors and minors and other interested students to create interesting events organized around our own perspectives. For more information about the Gender Studies Undergraduate Board, or to get involved, contact the Gender Studies office: gender@northwestern.edu.