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New Majorities II: A Cross-Country Duet on the State of Gender and Sexuality Studies in the Academy

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# CSWupdate

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# NEW MAJORITIES II

## A Cross-Country Duet on the State of Gender and Sexuality Studies in the Academy

BY KRISTA MIRANDA

*New Majorities II* had a double task: First, the day-long forum continued an initiative launched at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, and co-conceived by CSW director Kathleen McHugh and NYU Professor Lisa Duggan, to respond to the uneven budget cuts affecting gender and sexuality departments—as well as other interdisciplinary programs, such as African-American and Latino/a Studies—nationwide. Second, the NYU forum was a celebration of the 11th anniversary of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality (CSGS). (As CSGS Director Ann Pellegrini <http://www.csgsnyu.org/about/faculty-and-staff/> mock protested, “why celebrate the even when you can celebrate the odd.”)

This conversation/duet began with a one-day conference hosted by UCLA in early March. NYU’s forum was held on April 29th. The linked conferences proactively, instead of defensively, addressed the attacks on interdisciplinary programs in gender and sexuality studies, ethnic studies, and related fields. These programs are

often derided as “identity studies” departments, and this ideological attack along with the increased monetization of higher education has made these programs especially susceptible to budget cuts. In her framing remarks at the beginning of the day, Pellegrini, who, in addition to serving as CSGS director, is Associate Professor of Performance Studies and Religious Studies, acknowledged the necessity of learning to speak to administrators who control university budgets in the language of dollars and cents. But she also expressed the hope that the day’s conversation might generate a way of talking about the ongoing value of interdisciplinary projects like gender and sexuality studies and ethnic studies that was not reducible to economic inputs and outputs. She stressed that monetary value is not the only—nor even most important—measure of value.

### **GENDER AND SEXUALITY STUDIES AT NYU: HISTORY, FUTURES, INSTITUTIONAL POSSIBILITIES AND DILEMMAS**

The first panel, Gender and Sexuality Studies at NYU: History, Futures, Institutional Possibilities and Dilemmas, discussed CSGS’s history and the current challenges and possibilities for gender and sexuality studies at NYU. Rahma Abdulkadir, Research Fellow at NYU Abu Dhabi, kicked off the event with unfettered optimism by discussing the interdisciplinary possibilities of NYU Abu

Dhabi (NYU-AD). NYU-AD is a research institution with an integrated liberal Arts and Sciences college and an international student body. In the nascent stages of its development, NYU-AD has only 19 majors. Although it currently offers only three classes in gender and sexualities, Abdulkadir believes that the open nature of the core areas of study, which includes “pathways of world literature,” and the eagerness of NYU-AD’s leadership to be in conversation with NYU’s Department of Social and Cultural Analysis and CSGS, gives it significant space to expand its activities with a deeper incorporation of gender and sexuality-oriented research and pedagogy.

Next Carolyn Dinshaw, Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis and English at NYU, Founding Director of CSGS, and a self-professed “living archive,” addressed the changing nature of the center since 1999, when NYU was not yet the global institution it is today. At its inception, CSGS was linked to the Gender and Sexuality degree program in the College of Arts and Sciences, a union that gave the research group a means to forge long bonds not amenable to the “one-night stands” of CSGS events. The relationship between the Gender and Sexuality Studies program (GSS) and CSGS, Dinshaw explained, was multifold: the academic program provided an excellent foundation for the creation of a core audience for CSGS events while the political and pedagogical agenda of the Center

helped influence the curriculum of the GSS program with the creation of elective courses such as “Transgender histories, identities and politics.”

Don Kulick, who succeeded Dinshaw as CSGS Director and now a Professor of Comparative Human Development at University of Chicago, focused on two events in the Center’s history: CSGS’s shift from a center linked to an academic program to its current “all university” status and the permanent appointment of Robert Campbell as Associate Director. The former, Kulick explained, meant that as a “provostial” center, CSGS represents the entire university and not just the Arts and Sciences. It was thus better positioned to forge connections across the university with faculty and programs doing work in gender and sexuality studies. Campbell’s appointment, preceded by a series of temporary terms, gave the Center a permanent foundation and continuity. Because of these transitions, CSGS didn’t have to legitimate itself as a scholarly institution and was able to popularize its evening programming to include speakers like Heather Boyle and Kate Bornstein, broadening its audience beyond academia.

Drawing from her multiple roles at NYU since 1998, e. Frances White, Professor in the Gallatin School of Individualized Study and SCA and former Vice Provost for Faculty Development, spoke to the evolution of NYU’s Woman’s Studies Program into the Gender and Sexuality

Studies Program, now housed in SCA, and to her own role in increasing faculty diversity, which involved getting to know junior faculty of color in particular, and putting people together with similar concerns who were isolated in their respective disciplines. The panel's moderator Gayatri Gopinath, Associate Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis and Director of NYU's Gender and Sexuality Studies Program (<http://sca.as.nyu.edu/object/GayatriGopinath>), brought the conversation full circle by addressing the historical discussion of CSGS and SCA regarding the nuances of the notion of "value" in terms of NYU's increased corporatization. Attending to this problematic project of NYU's globalization, Gopinath reminded us of the New Majorities agenda by addressing how we can "create insurgencies within the structure" by theorizing how the interdisciplinarity itself interrupts the ways institutions are formed.

A lively discussion followed between the panelists and with the audience. There was a lot of attention, and concern, focused on the possible imperial dimensions of NYU's global initiatives at Abu Dhabi and beyond. As was pointed out, NYU is not the only major U.S. university building global satellite campuses, and participants together asked about the political and economic implications of this expansion at this particular historical moment.

## **NEW PARADIGMS, NEW POSSIBILITIES**

The second panel, New Paradigms, New Possibilities broadened the scope of discussion from an NYU focus to the fragile state of interdisciplinary programs nationally. The panel's speakers came from a variety of institutions: public and private, both colleges and universities. They continued and deepened the project begun in the morning, namely how to articulate why what women's studies, LGBTQ studies, and ethnic studies do matters at a time when the marketplace of ideas has been reduced to market value. Given the very real crises affecting particular programs, the panelists also sought to develop concrete and local strategies to combat the marginalization of "diversity" programs. There was a recognition that there is no one size fits all approach to the current situation.

Lisa Duggan introduced the panel by discussing New Majorities' history, which began with a questionnaire asking about the states of various interdisciplinary programs as a way to use local case studies to talk about national situations. This served as an empirical anchor for the subsequent early March conference at UCLA whose aim was to create new knowledges to talk across programs and institutions.

The panel's first speaker was Kathleen McHugh, Professor of English and Cinema and Media Studies program at UCLA and Director

of the Center for the Study of Women. McHugh presented how faculty demographics would be affected without the programs under attack by sharing the statistical research she compiled from hypothetical campus UCLX: without such programs, the number of white-male faculty would be unaffected; white-female employment would drop by almost 10%; and faculty of color would be reduced by about 50%. Riffing off David Letterman's daily top ten list, McHugh also shared the top ten insights of *New Majorities*: *New Majorities* is proactive rather than reactive; rethinks the marginal; moves entrenched modes of thinking; and produces alternative structures of university governance.

Providing a perspective from Duke University, Jennifer D. Brody, the embodiment of interdisciplinarity (and overextended academic labor) herself, is a Professor of African and African American Studies who also teaches Performance Studies, Gender/Sexuality Studies, and Visuality and Black Performance. Among other things, Brody addressed the issues of downsizing, noting in particular how funding for the arts has been slashed at various institutions. This affects diversity at our institutions in at least two ways: the creative arts offer an important site for university-community contact and have also traditionally provided a receptive space for women and people of color. But Brody also pointed to her own position at Duke, where



The NYU Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality

presents

# Gender and Sexuality: a Musical Revue!



featuring:

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**Viva DeConcini**  
**Karen Finley**  
**Geo Wyeth**  
**Jomama Jones**  
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she has a triple appointment, to ask what happens when one body is asked to perform diversity in multiple institutional sites? No body can do it, she said, but particular bodies are commonly asked to. Connecting back to McHugh's presentation, Brody underscored the unequal division of labor that results when white women and women and men of color are asked to be the institutional face of diversity. Additionally, she pointed out that women and people of color are disproportionately hired in diversity programs, which allows public land grant universities (and she used to teach at one) to claim they are meeting various diversity targets or goals even as they are in fact continuing to segregate the university by knowledge division and department.

Next was Laura Levitt (<http://www.temple.edu/religion/levitt/>), Professor of Religion and Women's Studies at Temple University, who is "in belly of beast" of the academic budget crunch. At Temple, five programs—including Woman's Studies, American Studies, Jewish studies—will be absorbed in the departments of Sociology, English, History, etc. The rationale for this administrative decision, Levitt explains, was fiscal; in other words, these programs are failing and not valuable. After the five programs hand over their autonomy to departments, the continued life of the programs would depend on the voluntary labor of an already over-extended staff, most of whom were highly vulnerable, non-tenured

faculty. Levitt reminded us of an important oversight: this restructuring leaves little time for actual teaching and researching.

Following Levitt was Janet R. Jakobsen, Professor of Women's Studies (<http://womensstudies.barnard.edu/profiles/jjakobse>) and Director of Barnard College's Center for Research on Women (<http://womensstudies.barnard.edu/bcrw/>). As a professor at a women's college where Women's Studies and feminist research are not currently under attack, Jakobsen spoke to the particular dangers of being on the receiving end of this capital flow. In the new neoliberal order, she argued, women and feminism were both now seen as good investments through which money might circulate along with imperialism. How would feminist work at U.S. colleges and universities be redefined in the light of this monetized "woman question"? Which kinds of research projects would be funded and supported and which, not? The way in which capital flows are set up to run through academic institutions, she maintained, can have serious dangers for other progressive institutions, like poorly funded activist organizations. Jakobsen's talk was a warning call against such complicity that marginalizes other projects of resistance.

Licia Fiol-Matta, Professor of Latin American & Puerto Rican Studies at Lehman College, CUNY (<http://www.lehman.edu/academics/arts-humanities/latin-puerto-rican-studies/>

[lprsfliolmatta.php](http://lprsfliolmatta.php)), concluded the panel with an example of the way diversity studies play out in specific institutional sites and in relation to local demographics. At Lehman, Fiol-Matta explains, there is a radical disconnect between the faculty, which consists of mostly of white, relatively wealthy males, and the student body, primarily composed of women of color. Fiol-Matta revealed another paradox: while one would think this population would be receptive to interdisciplinary, diversity-oriented thinking, they succumb to the extreme conservatism expressed through the business model of education, where the student is the consumer and goods are recognizable. As a result, this population is entrenched in an aspirational model toward insertion into the capitalist structure that equates "making it" with "making money." But Fiol-Matta stressed the complexity of Lehman's particular students' identification with this aspirational model, suggesting that it could be seen as a vehicle of Americanization and racialized assimilation. In other words: the consumer-citizen economic circuit works differently, and demands different things, of different student bodies. As scholars of diversity, how do we reckon with this concrete situation?

In (im)proper interdisciplinary fashion, the conference closed with a performance party to celebrate the 11th anniversary of the Center. The performance party, entitled "Gender and

Sexuality: A Musical Revue," was produced by musician Viva DeConcini and held at a local music venue, the Gallery at Le Poisson Rouge. The cabaret-style event was emceed by Jennifer Miller, founder of Circus Amok and Associate Professor of Humanities and Media Studies at Pratt Institute. The featured performers included Karen Finley, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, Geo Wyeth, burlesque performers Darlinda Just Darlinda and Coco Lectric, and Daniel Alexander Jones (AKA Jomama Jones). About 200 people packed the venue for the musical celebrations as the performers put pedagogy into artistic practice. "Gender and Sexuality: A Musical Revue" showcased the serious play of gender and sexuality studies. It also offered a welcome respite from—and reenergizing bounce to confront—the crises discussed during the day.

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