

Gender Matters

A Bulletin of the Illinois State University Women's and Gender Studies Program

Volume 14, Issue 2, November/December 2008

Ms. Informed

By Alison Bailey

A few weeks ago I asked some of the women in one of my classes whether they referred to themselves as Ms., Mrs., or Miss. The majority of their responses revealed that they lacked a clear understanding not only of what Ms. means, but also of the history of how this term came into usage. To ensure that the confusion wasn't mine I asked the entire class, "Well, when do you think a woman should use Ms.?" Their answers surprised me: one student told the class that "Miss was for young girls, until they were teens, then as soon as they became married or became a woman, they could use Ms. if they want." Others were closer to the mark: "You use Ms. when you are not sure if a woman is married, or if she prefers it." Some responses were funny: "I would use Ms. for a widowed woman. I also know a divorced woman who uses Ms., so I guess it's for a woman who is no longer married for whatever reason." One student sounded a cautionary note: "It was originally a feminist alternative to Mrs., so if you use it people will think you're either a feminist or bitter about being single." Ouch!

I understand that languages are constantly evolving, but the meanings of words usually change *in response* to something. My students' answers made me wonder if the strong historical connection between women's titles and their marital status was merely reasserting itself during socially conservative times, or if the cultural importance placed on women's marital status continues to be so strong that the married/not married dichotomy is the only plausible way my students can make sense of the

term. Both interpretations suggest that *the original use of Ms. as a marital status-neutral equivalent to Mr.* is eroding. If you don't know the term's history, then you can only hazard a guess at its original meaning based on cultural [read patriarchal] preconceptions about womanhood.

I'm just old enough to remember the first issue of *Ms. Magazine* and the public stir it caused over the use of Ms. as an alternative honorific (a title used to convey respect when addressing another person). Because honorifics are cultural productions, it makes sense that they would be used to mark those social relationships that a particular culture understands to be integral to the continued function of important social institutions and practices. For instance, honorifics such as Duke and Duchess or Lord and Lady are artifacts of England's feudal history. Historically these titles marked relationships between and among landholders and the royalty in a culture where land ownership and social class were important to cementing political alliances.

If we follow this logic, then the social practice of marking women's marital status (and not men's) indicates that knowing whether a woman is "available" must still be integral to the continued functioning of important social institutions (patriarchy, heterosexuality) and practices (marriage, mothering). This tells us that in most cultures in the U.S., a woman's status as single, widowed, or divorced continues to be one of the most important things we need to know about her. "Mr." marks nothing more than maleness. As such, it is the honorific equivalent of not wearing a wedding ring when you are married. No one needs to know. (*Cont'd*)

Inside This Issue

- 1 Feature Articles
- 3 Faculty News
- 4 Student News
- 7 Call For Papers
- 8 Calendar

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The purpose of Ms. was to come up with an honorific equivalent to Mr. that would open up the “no one needs to know” option to us gals.

The history of Ms. as a neutral title makes this clear. Originally, Mister and Mistress marked gender only and made no reference to marital status. This changed as the contractions Miss and Mrs. came into use in the early 17th century.¹ The modern use of Ms. as an alternative honorific came about in 1961 when Sheila Michaels, a civil rights activist, read “Ms.” as a promising typographical error in a copy of *News and Letters*, a prominent Marxist-Humanist publication. Michaels’ biological parents never married, so she had been looking for a title for a “woman that did not belong to a man,” and that typo fit. At the time, both the Civil Rights and the emerging women’s movements ignored her efforts to promote the usage of this new honorific. A decade later a friend of Gloria Steinem heard Michaels use “Ms.” during a WBAI radio interview with a radical New York group called The Feminists and suggested it as a title for Steinem’s new magazine.² Later that year New York Congresswoman Bella Abzug introduced legislation into Congress allowing women not to disclose their marital status on federal forms, and the first issue of *Ms.* appeared as an insert in *New York Magazine*. Both events moved the usage of Ms. into mainstream circulation.

So, now you know.

¹ Martin, Judith. 1990. *Miss Manners Guide to the Turn of the Millennium*. New York: Simon and Schuster, p.10.

² Eve Kay, “Call Me Ms.” *The Guardian*, June 29, 2007. ☺

Why Use Ethnic Labels?

By Becca Chase

On September 18, Suzanne Oboler delivered the Latino Heritage Month keynote lecture on “Latino, Hispanic...The Consequences of Ethnic Labels in Contemporary U.S.

Society.” While she spoke specifically about the categories of Hispanic, Latino/a, and Chicano/a, at the outset she encouraged the audience to apply the same scrutiny to other ethnic/racial labels.



Suzanne Oboler and Becca Chase

In 1977, the U.S. Census listed five official ethnic and racial groups: African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, and White European. The term “Hispanic” was coined as an umbrella term for all Spanish-speaking people. The U.S. government uses ethnic/racial labels to count membership in these categories and to measure data such as employment and income rates, infant mortality, educational achievement, and the like. For this reason, Oboler asserted, they are critically important.

However, she regards the term “Hispanic” to have only limited usefulness, because it belies the cultural diversity represented among the various regional and national groups it subsumes. Under this umbrella we find people from Mexico; Puerto Rico, Cuba, and other Caribbean islands; and also from Central America, South America, and Spain. Some are indigenous people who speak Spanish due to the colonial legacies of their countries. Others have African roots because the Spanish conquistadores brought their ancestors to the Caribbean as slaves. Some are direct descendants of the colonial Spaniards. And of course these groups have intermarried over the generations. When the Census conflated all these groups, rather than calculating the variations in income, education, and other demographic data from group to group, this led to the inequitable distribution of scarce governmental resources.

Some U.S. Hispanics embrace the term precisely because it leaves the question of origins out of the equation, thus allowing people to identify more strongly with the powerful conquistadores. Others, particularly on the Left, criticize the label, arguing that it makes the subgroups subsumed by this term invisible within mainstream society, and allows us to ignore the historical realities of its subgroups. As a result of these problems, and concurrently with the movements to establish cultural and ethnic studies on campuses, grassroots organizers proposed using “Latino” and “Latina” (sometimes written as Latin@) as alternatives that acknowledge indigenous and African origins and gender, and “Chicano” and “Chicana” to distinguish Spanish-speaking people who have indigenous Mexican ancestry. Recognizing the need for more specificity, beginning in 1990 the U.S. Census still asked people to identify as Hispanic, but also asked people to identify further by country of origin.

The consequences of ethnic labels are complex, Oboler cautioned. Regardless of their origins, once coined they take on lives of their own. The same label that helps people understand their place in a community can be used by others to stereotype those same people.

(Continued)

The same term that may help call attention to economic inequities arising from racist policies may be twisted to reinscribe discrimination. And the consequences are not just sociological. When we place too much emphasis on group identities, we recognize individuals only as representatives of a group, not as independent selves, and this can have a profound psychological effect on each of us. Yet when we reject group identities, we ignore social realities, and this also can lead to social injustices. It's a delicate balance. ☺

American marketing strategy employed by a generation of filmmakers who are more aware of multiculturalism than was the generation before them. Though cultural theorists see *Mulan* as an example of colonization that represents the negative impact globalization can have on children's minds, to Curry the Disney version sparked a global revival of the legend that contributes to the global trend of transculturalization. She believes that the film does not ruin the "purity" of the culture, for no culture is ever pure. The Disney version should not be scorned completely, she argues, but rather seen as a "different facet" of the traditional legend. ☺

Disney's *Mulan*—A Modern Legend

By Julia Drauden



Dr. Ramona Curry of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's Department of English visited ISU on November 19 to take part in the International Studies Seminar. In her lecture, "Mulan Remade: A Legend of 'Transculturalization,'" she illuminated the traditional Chinese legend of the

heroine Mulan behind the animated Disney film and explored its global cultural impact.

Curry pointed out that Westerners are aware of the legend almost entirely because of the Disney version. Prior to 1998, when the film premiered, the legend of Mulan was almost unknown in the West. However, the legend of Mulan is a familiar traditional story in Chinese culture and originates from a poem written circa 500 A.D. Six live-action film versions were released in Chinese cinemas between 1927 and 1963. Western culture has "no frame of comparative reference for *Mulan*" as we do for other animated films based in our own culture, explained Curry, so it is difficult for Westerners to critique the movie. The glaring historical and cultural inaccuracies we can easily pick out of films such as *Pocahontas* are lost to us in *Mulan*. This lack of an accurate cultural context has led Chinese critics to object to the film. These critics deplore the filmmakers' overly simplistic and reductive "Disneyfication" of Asian culture. Curry pointed out that in the Disney version, the character Mulan acts more like a white American teenager than a Chinese child in the fifth century.

Nevertheless, Curry does not feel that the movie's impact is all negative. *Mulan* is one of the first Disney films featuring a hero or heroine of color. Curry believes Disney's decision to do this is part of an

Faculty News

Manavalli Joins WGS Affiliated Faculty

Krishna Manavalli joins the WGS affiliated faculty as an assistant professor of English. She received her Ph.D. from Michigan State University, where she focused on postcolonial and global literary studies, and an M.A. in English from Old Dominion University. Her research engages postcolonial literature and theory, Indo-Anglian literature, and feminist cultural studies. She has taught courses ranging from women's writing in America to Middle Eastern studies. Apart from English, she is also fluent in several South Asian languages—Sanskrit, Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, and Tamil. ☺



Faculty Accomplishments

Pat Badani has been nominated to the AICA-USA organization (International Association of Art Critics).

Alison Bailey was invited to the University of Oregon to present her paper "Strategic Ignorance" to the philosophy department. While she was there, she also presented "Helping Students See Their Role in the Learning Process" and "Helping Students Read Theory" for the Teaching Effectiveness Program.

Lee Brasseur has been named to the editorial advisory board of *Technical Communication Quarterly*, the major journal focusing on the scholarship of teaching and learning in the discipline.

Sara Cole presented "College Students' Attitudes Toward Oral Sex: An Exploratory Study" at the 59th Annual Meeting of the Society for Public (Cont'd)

Health Education, which was held Oct. 23-25 in San Diego, CA.

Angela Haas published “Wired Wombs: A Rhetorical Analysis of Online Fertility Support Communities” featured in *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice: Communities, Pedagogies, and Social Action* (Kristine Blair, Radhika Gajjala, Christine Tulley, ed. Hampton Press, 2008).

Melissa Johnson received the University Service Initiative Award for her work with the Colloquium on Visual Culture and the new M.A. in Visual Culture.

Melissa Oresky is currently an artist-in-residence at the Santa Fe Art Institute in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and was an artist-in-residence in Schloss Pluschow, a residency studio facility in Mecklenburg, Germany, for the month of September. ☺

A Big Autumn for Books



Lucinda Beier has two new books out this fall: *Health Culture in the Heartland, 1880-1980: An Oral History* (University of Illinois Press); and *For Their Own Good: The Transformation of English Working-Class Health Culture, 1880-1970* (The Ohio State University Press).

Kass Fleisher's *Talking out of School: Memoir of an Educated Woman* was published by Dalkey Archive Press in November. An excerpt from the book was featured in the Dec. 4 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.



Student News

Up with Love, Down with H8!

By Jenna Goldsmith

On Friday, November 14, students, faculty, and community members joined together in a Support Love demonstration, armed only with chants, signs, and love. Just ten days earlier, Americans voted Senator Barack Obama into office as president. While this historic event was happening, other changes were occurring in states from coast to coast that negatively affect same-sex couples.

Voters in Arizona, California, and Florida passed referendums that direct these states to amend their constitutions, adding to the 29 states that already have legislation banning gay marriage. The vote in California was hugely important in light of the recent court decision legalizing gay marriage in that state. Arkansas passed an initiative banning same-sex (and all unmarried) couples from adopting children. In response to these reactionary votes, Americans who disagreed with the amendments united to voice their support of the targeted communities.

With the bittersweet news of the previous night in mind, members of ISU Pride met on November 5. They decided to spearhead a rally on campus to protest California’s Proposition 8 and the other anti-gay initiatives. The next week they made posters and led the march and rally. Illinois Wesleyan’s Pride Alliance joined the organizing effort. (*Continued*)



Photos Courtesy of Paula Ressler (top) and Peter Nelson

On a route that took the demonstrators to all corners of the campus, 100-200 people marched, carrying placards and chanting, “What do we want? Equality! When do we want it? Now!” Speaking at the rally, ISU Pride President Ashley Clark said, “The rights of a minority should never be put to a popular vote.” Demonstrators were met with smiles and waves by students observing the march from their apartment windows, the supportive honks of cars driving past—and only two individual hecklers. Some students just passing by joined the crowd until the march’s end outside of Milner Library, where Clark urged the invigorated demonstrators to keep up their work to promote equality for same-sex couples, emphasizing that much more needs to be done and challenging protestors to stay active. ☀

FLAME Partners with YWCA

By Brandy Peak

FLAME is privileged to welcome our new community advisor, Yadira Ruiz, the Director of YWCA Stepping Stones. She joined FLAME in August 2008 and has provided a valuable link between campus and community. The YWCA co-sponsored all of our meetings and events this fall. For Take Back the Night (TBTN), Yadira recruited many community organizations and YWCA contributed to the cost of the event. She also co-facilitated the safe-space discussions after the TBTN march. The YWCA and the Mid-Central Community Action’s Countering Domestic Violence Unit sponsored a safe space for the Clothesline Project. Several FLAME members are YWCA volunteers and have gone through the 40-hour sexual assault victims’ advocate training.

After TBTN, FLAME brought in Shelly, a court advocate for Mid-Central Community Action’s Countering Domestic Violence Unit. Also, Shannon Schmidt and Lydia Wiede of Student Counseling Services presented educational information about disordered eating. The information they presented surprised many attendees and provided a framework to encompass all kinds of disordered eating. Next semester’s meetings will be held every other Monday in the Rachel Cooper second floor lounge, beginning January 26. ☀



*Opening of “Just Sit Still and Look Pretty”
Photo Courtesy of Jenna Goldsmith*

“Just Sit Still and Look Pretty”

By Meg White and Becca Chase



The latest WGS gallery show, which opened on November 13, features paintings by Brenda Mendoza (*left*) and photos by Susan Mamoun (*right*). Both artists intend for the show to be a commentary on women’s fashion, with Brenda using colors and shapes from the 1920s-1940s, and Susan exploring cultural identity. Both are interested in layers of meaning, represented by the layered effects of Mendoza’s work and the fact that Mamoun’s models wear many layers. Mendoza’s paintings more directly emphasized “prettiness,” while Mamoun, whose family comes from war-torn Lebanon, ironically chose to position her model in relation to a scarred landscape, calling attention to how the wars have scarred families, identities, and the landscape there.

The artists evoke memories of their own experiences and also hope to stimulate the memories of the viewers. Mamoun’s photos are part of a larger series in which she explores “concepts of identity, time, memory, and loss.” The series begins with photographs depicting a woman in a landscape, and ends with images of her garments alone in the same landscape. “The implication of time passing and the loss of the woman offer a general mood of nostalgia,” writes Mamoun in the artists’ statement for the show.

Through Mendoza’s paintings she recalls her mother making patterns for garments. “Each painting,” she explains, “is done by layering shapes and patterns one after the other without altering the layer underneath.” Mendoza also incorporates organic curves into her paintings to reference curves of women’s bodies.

Mendoza and Mamoun decided to collaborate on this exhibit when they realized that fabric plays such an important role in their work. As part of their collaborative process Mendoza looked at the colors and shapes in Mamoun’s photographs and then painted in response. Likewise, Mamoun responded to the formal elements of Brenda’s work by using appropriate clothes, composition, and color. Through this interplay, Mamoun and Mendoza support each other’s art and ideas. ☀

Gay? Fine by Me



Students flock to the “Gay? Fine by Me” table outside of Schroeder Hall to pick out their free t-shirts. This is the third year ISU Pride has participated in the national campaign in which students can get a free t-shirt and wear it collectively to show support for the LGBT community. Over 2,000 t-shirts have been given away at ISU to date.

Student Accomplishments

Bryan Asbury was awarded a \$3,000 Acorn Scholarship from the Acorn Equality Fund. Acorn is dedicated to providing “support for the advancement of education, health, and civil rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons and their allies in downstate Illinois.”

Shushan Avagyan organized a two-day event, held August 3-4, at the Women’s Resource Center, of which she is co-founder, in Yerevan, Armenia. The exhibit featured video and art installations, performance pieces, and readings.

Jenna Goldsmith was awarded a \$2,000 Luke Scholarship from the Acorn Equality Fund. She also was inducted into Sigma Tau Delta, the International English Honor Society. ☺

Come together for great food and company at the Women’s and Gender Studies & FLAME Student Social! Mon. Feb. 2, 8 p.m., Rachel Cooper 237. Discussion: Why join FLAME? Why minor in Women’s and Gender Studies?

SAVE THE DATE!

The Vagina Monologues will be performed on Friday and Saturday, February 20 and 21, in Capen Auditorium at 7:00 p.m. Come early for the Vagina Extravaganza; Chocolate Vaginas, V-day t-shirts, and Vagina-friendly merchandise will be available for sale at this event. Buy your tickets early to reserve your spot. All proceeds will be donated to local organizations and to help stop violence against women in the Democratic Republic of Congo, so bring your wallet and bring your friends to *The Vagina Monologues*.



*Acorn Equality Fund Luke Scholarship recipient
Jenna Goldsmith*



*Dorothy E. Lee
Scholarship recipient
Mauria Herman*



Nikki Aitkin, Graduating WGS Certificate Student

Illinois State University Women's and Gender Studies Program

Faculty—please encourage your students to submit outstanding papers or presentations that they complete for your classes to the Women's and Gender Studies Programming Committee for consideration for the spring symposium.

Fourteenth Annual Women's and Gender Studies Symposium

**Friday,
April 3
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.**

**University
Galleries**

**Illinois State
University**

For more information contact Rozel White at: (309) 438-2947 or wgstudies@ilstu.edu or visit our web site at: www.womensandgenderstudies.ilstu.edu

Call for Papers

Panels on Friday morning and afternoon

Lunch at noon

Keynote Address at 1:00 pm

Dr. Susan Bordo

"Beyond 'Eating Disorders': Why We Need to Rethink Everything We Thought We Knew"

Undergraduate and graduate students are invited to submit papers; full descriptions of other types of presentations (e.g. performance pieces and artist's talks), including scripts, images, and the like; or abstracts of papers or presentations. Papers and presentations are welcome on any topic related to the study of women and/or gender. Students must have a faculty sponsor.

Abstracts should include: A summary of main argument or findings, research methodology (if applicable), and sources of information/data.

Send submissions with a coversheet providing the following information:

Title of paper or presentation

Name, address, telephone number, and e-mail address

Sponsoring professor and, if relevant, the course for which you wrote the paper or developed the presentation

The deadline for submissions is **March 6, 2009**.

Send to:

Women's and Gender Studies Programming Committee

Illinois State University

Campus Box 4260

Normal, IL 61790-4260

or

submit your proposal at the Women's and Gender Studies office, Rachel Cooper 237, or by e-mail at wgstudies@ilstu.edu.

Gender Matters
Illinois State University
Women's and Gender Studies Program
Rachel Cooper 2nd Floor
Campus Box 4260
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Congratulations, Graduates!

Graduate Certificate:

Nicole Aitken, English

Minor:

Lauren Stevens, Mass Communication

Welcome, Newcomers!

New Graduate Certificate Students:

Melissa Kossick, Art Education

Britten Traughber, Fine Arts

New Minors:

Megan Carey, Communications

Allison Piper, Public Relations

Thom Zimmerman, English

Calendar

Jan. 14 ISU Pride Queer Games Night. SSB 375, 7-9 p.m.

Jan. 21 ISU Pride Family Focus Night. SSB 375, 7-9 p.m.

Jan. 26 FLAME meeting. RC 2nd floor lounge, 8 p.m.

Jan. 28 ISU Pride Focus Group. SSB 375, 7-9 p.m.

Jan. 30 WGS Meet & Greet. Fat Jack's, 5:30-7:30 p.m.

Feb. 2 WGS minor and FLAME Student Social. RC 237, 8 p.m.

Feb. 20-21 *The Vagina Monologues*. Capen Auditorium, 7 p.m. (Doors open at 6:30 p.m.)

Apr. 3 Fourteenth Annual Women's and Gender Studies Symposium. University Galleries, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.