

## On Race, Class, and Midwifery

By Emily Putnam

Every year an estimated four million women give birth in the United States.<sup>1</sup> As a graduate student writing her master's thesis on Black women's attitudes toward midwifery, I wondered how race and class shape understandings of pregnancy, childbirth, and medical institutions. After all, childbirth is not only a biological experience but also one mediated by culture, history, technology, and capitalism. In order to understand *why* black women make the childbirth choices they do, we must consider whether race, gender, and colonialism have historically shaped these attitudes.

Birth attendants are a key part of the birth experience. The majority of women have their pregnancies monitored by a physician and deliver in a hospital. Yet a growing percentage of American women are rediscovering midwives. Approximately 7.8% of all U.S. births are attended by Certified Nurse Midwives.<sup>2</sup> Most mothers using midwives are white, educated, and middle-class. African-American women are almost twice as likely to choose a physician-assisted delivery, and three times more likely to select a physician than midwife-physician team.<sup>3</sup> A recent Michigan study reported that Medicaid recipients and white, college-educated women were more likely to use nurse-midwives, whereas college-educated nonwhite women were less likely to employ them.<sup>4</sup>

This discrepancy is intriguing given the long documented history of midwives in the African-American community.<sup>5</sup> Many early American midwives

were from West Africa. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, slave owners often picked a female slave to serve as the plantation midwife. These women became known as "granny midwives" and continued to deliver both Black and white babies well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The feminist literature on midwifery focuses almost exclusively on white women. Attention to Black women's historical and contemporary experiences with midwives must consider: (1) the historical and cultural meanings Europeans have ascribed to Black women's reproductive bodies during the process of colonization, and (2) an understanding of African-American women's experiences with institutionalized medicine.

African-American women's bodies continue to be shaped in response to the sexual and racial divisions of labor in the American colonies. Colonial constructions of African-American women as fecund, hypersexual, and able to work long hours reflect the colonizer's need to reproduce laborers. As such, Black women's perceived hypersexuality justified forced breeding and rape. Representations of Black women and men as beasts also justified forced labor from dawn to dusk under inhumane and cruel conditions.

We also need to situate Black women's choices about birthing against the history of U.S. medical treatment of Black bodies. For example, the invention of the speculum by the "father of American gynecology," J. Marion Sims, was the result of experimental surgeries on slave women in his backyard hospital in Montgomery, Alabama.<sup>6</sup> In the 1950s Black women were the targets of "Mississippi appendectomies"—involuntary sterilizations—in hospitals across the country.<sup>7</sup> (*Cont'd*)

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### *Women's and Gender Studies Staff*

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The *HeLa* cells used in most cancer research were grown from Henrietta Lacks's cervical cells without her permission.<sup>8</sup> And the Tuskegee syphilis experiments are a classic reminder of the racial abuses of medical research.

When interviewing a 28-year-old college-educated mother, I asked if she was familiar with the history of midwives in the Black community. She was not, but went on to explain her friends' reactions to water births. Her white friends were supportive. Her Black friends were not. She remarked, "I just thought well, [my Black friends] are inexperienced, they don't know it is tradition. Our culture is very skeptical . . . . Honestly, I have never heard of African-American families [today] doing the whole midwife thing, never. Kind of like—so what, what do we need a midwife for? Why go to the middleman when I can go right to the doctor?"

Clearly, not all women are excited about midwifery. The preference for hospital births indicates to me that although Black women may still be skeptical of institutional medicine, they believe they deserve better than a granny midwife. To understand women's considerations and choices in childbirth, we must know and understand the historical influences of gender, race, and colonialism.

*Emily Putnam is a master's student in Sociology.*

1. J. A. Martin, et al. *National Vital Statistics Report: Births: Final Data for 2006* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).
2. Ibid.
3. S. H. White, *Birth Alternatives: How Women Select Childbirth Care* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).
4. S. Stewart, "Economic and Personal Factors Affecting Women's Use of Nurse-Midwives in Michigan" in *Family Planning Perspectives* 30(5): 231-235.
5. G. J. Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South: Dialogues of Birth, Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
6. T. Kapsalis, "Mastering the Female Pelvis: Race and the Tools of Reproduction" in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 261-263.
7. R. M. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950-1980* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).
8. Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2010). ☼

## Zonta International Meets in Bloomington

By Sarah Walczynski

On October 15-17, Zonta members from Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin gathered at The Chateau Hotel and Conference Center in Bloomington for their district conference. In conjunction with this meeting the group collected used cell phones for Neville House, Mid-Central Community Action's local domestic violence shelter.



Founded in 1919, Zonta International is a nonsectarian and nonpartisan global organization of professionals working together to advance the status of women worldwide through service and advocacy. The 31,000-plus members of more than 1,200 Zonta Clubs around the world donate their time, talents, and financial and material support to local and international service projects and scholarships aimed at fulfilling Zonta's mission: to advance the status of women worldwide by improving the legal, political, economic, educational, health, and professional status of women at the global and local levels through service and advocacy.

Zonta supports all-female microcredit programs, technical skills training, and improved techniques in the production and marketing of goods. It helps women attain careers in traditionally male-dominated professions through the Amelia Earhart Fellowships and Jane M. Klausman Women in Business Scholarships.

The organization supports efforts to reduce the risk of HIV/AIDS by promoting health education and prevention of mother-to-child transmission programs. It helps provide basic health services and health education for women and children living in rural or poor urban areas, and works to reduce instances of female genital cutting, maternal and neonatal tetanus, and obstetric fistulas.

Through the Young Women in Public Affairs Award, Zonta encourages more young women to participate in public and political life by recognizing them for their commitment to the volunteer sector, volunteer leadership achievements, and dedication to the advancement of the status of women. Zonta's Z Club and Golden Z Club program helps high school, college, and university students develop leadership skills, explore career options, and participate in local and international community service projects. (*Cont'd*)

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Zonta cooperates with the United Nations to advocate for local and international laws and policies that appropriately address issues of gender inequality. The organization also joins U.N. efforts to prevent violence against women by raising awareness of and improving education about violence against women and children; implementing, promoting, and enforcing local laws and policies that protect women and victims of violence; and providing medical and legal services for survivors and potential victims of violence and human trafficking.

The nearest Zonta Clubs are in LaSalle-Peru and Streator. On October 23, stores in Peru will be collecting items for women leaving the domestic violence shelter. In LaSalle on October 26, the LaSalle-Peru club will sponsor a luminary and informational panel about domestic violence. Zonta will hold a holiday purse sale on November 16 and host a “guys’ night out” purse and jewelry sale on February 8. Then on March 27 there will be a fundraising art auction and wine/martini reception. For details on these events and to learn how you can get involved, go to <http://www.zonta.org/> or contact Sarah Walczynski at [saskers@ilstu.edu](mailto:saskers@ilstu.edu).

*Sarah Walczynski is a computer support specialist for ISU's College of Arts and Sciences.* ☼

## **BD Wong Packs the House**

By Jessica Bales

About 500 people packed the Brown Ballroom on September 27 for the University Housing Services LGBT Cultural Dinner. Keynote speaker BD Wong spoke about his life as an actor (*Law and Order: SVU, Oz*), Asian American, gay man, and gay parent. Wong described himself as “the gayest child you ever met.” As a young man he mainly identified as an Asian American and a creative performer. Despite the lack of positive portrayals of Asians in the media, Wong managed to find work in Hollywood.

He first gained national attention by winning numerous awards for his performance as Song Liling in the play *M. Butterfly*. Wong recalled that show as a revelation. He was able to fully inhabit the role because for the first time he played an authentic Chinese character in a play written by a Chinese-American playwright. This in turn helped him proudly embrace his Asian-American identity.

Shortly thereafter, Wong and his partner decided to become parents. Faced with the traumatic pregnancy and premature birth of his son by way of a surrogate mother, Wong began to write humorous yet therapeutic e-mails

to his friends and family. These rapidly “went viral,” and Harper Entertainment offered Wong a book deal. By publicizing his book, *Following Foo: (the electronic adventures of the Chestnut Man)*, Wong came out to the world.

BD Wong delivered a simple yet powerful message: suppressing his identity first as an Asian American and then as a gay man not only made it impossible to be completely himself in the world, but it affected everything he did. Performing in authentic Asian roles and coming out as a gay parent has led to a more fulfilling career and happier life. Wong advocates coming out because it “vastly improves the quality of life.”

He also spoke about his work with the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, which is dedicated to ending hate violence against LGBTQ communities. The six suicides in the last month completed by young men who were bullied and harassed due to their perceived sexual orientation highlight the importance of these programs. These tragedies demonstrate the critical importance of coming out as well as the dangers that persist for both closeted and openly gay people.

The event was sponsored by University Housing Services, Association of Residence Halls, Association of South Campus, Campus Dining Services, Diversity Advocacy (a unit of the Dean of Students Office), the Fell Trust, PRIDE, and South Unity.

*Jessica Bales is a WGS minor and an intern for the LGBT/Queer Studies and Services Institute.* ☼

## **Children in Street Situations**

By Kelly Donnellan

Dr. Maria Schmeeckle (Sociology and Anthropology, WGS affiliated faculty) spoke about “A Global Perspective and Action Agenda regarding Children in Street Situations” at the September 29<sup>th</sup> International Studies Seminar.

While researchers on children in street situations usually work within separate disciplines and at either local or national levels, Schmeeckle’s innovative project analyzes the dilemma from interdisciplinary and global perspectives. Although there are local variations, Schmeeckle’s research suggests that there are macro factors that cross cultures and geography, such as war and civil unrest, governmental policies, death of parents from diseases such as HIV/AIDS, natural disasters, or rapid urbanization and poverty. (*Cont’d*)



Dr. Maria Schmeeckle

The streets provide a positive environment for some youngsters. They appeal to young people for certain individual freedoms, and they present economic opportunities to assist their families with an additional income. However, popular images and terminology often give outsiders a distorted view of what street life entails for children.

Sensationalized images show children sniffing glue, and mainstream magazines portray them as victims of violence or survival sex. Other popular images exaggerate the street life's freedom and adventure, as for example in the popular movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. Schmeeckle contends that vague and ambiguous terminology can also complicate the matter. Defining who is a "child of the streets" is difficult because the youth are often on the move, working, living between shelters and institutions, or soon to be on the streets. Schmeeckle uses the term "children in street situations" to include all possibilities.

Schmeeckle's explanation of the children's skills derails the stereotypical image of youth as passive victims. In her talk she included examples of children in India that formed their own banks and restaurants to provide for themselves. These children not only understand the situations they are in, but also what developments are necessary for their survival. She calls for researchers from developed and developing countries and government and organization leaders to collaborate in order to formulate cohesive plans. It also is imperative, Schmeeckle insists, that solutions include the children in the decision-making process and preserve their independence. ☀

### Nineteenth-Century Roots of Community Engagement

On October 7, the Illinois State University Fall Speaker Series kicked off ISU's Homecoming events with the presentation "Celebrating the Legacy of ISNU Women: A Mentor, a Doctor, and an Educator." Tina Brakebill (History), Monica Noraian (History) and Sandra Harmon (History and Women's Studies, retired) presented their research on three women who helped set the university's intellectual direction during its early years in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Brakebill spoke about Celestia Rice Colby, an antebellum dairy farmer who never attended a university

but mentored her daughters, one of whom, Rose Colby, earned her Ph.D. and became a long-time professor of literature at Illinois State Normal University.

Harmon discussed the life of Sarah Hackett Stevenson, ISNU class of 1863, who became a prominent physician and women's club leader in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Chicago and was the first woman delegate to the American Medical Association. As a professor at the Chicago Women's Medical College, she helped open doors for other women to become doctors.

Noraian's subject was the educator Sarah Raymond, ISNU class of 1866, who as Bloomington Superintendent of Schools was the first woman superintendent in the U.S. The training Raymond received at ISNU influenced her work, including her efforts to provide equal educational opportunities to black students and professional opportunities for women teachers.

Noraian and Brakebill researched their subjects in local archives at the McLean County Museum of History and ISU's special collections. Harmon used ISU's archives and several other sources. Brakebill is author of "*Circumstances are Destiny*": *An Antebellum Woman's Struggle to Define Sphere* (Kent State University Press, 2006). Noraian is author of *Women's Rights, Racial Integration, and Education from 1850-1920: The Case of Sarah Raymond, the First Female Superintendent* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

The speakers wanted to make these women's voices heard so that students have models for community engagement. Middle school education student Lauren Laws and history major Christine McMillion, who currently are taking a U.S. women's history course, commented that learning about how difficult it was for these women to secure an education and profession encouraged them to make the most of their educations. McMillion affirmed that hearing about these women's struggles made her want to do something special with her education to carry on their legacy and that of ISU. ☀



Pictured from left, Dr. Monica Noraian, Dr. Tina Brakebill and Dr. Sandra Harmon

## Faculty Accomplishments

**Alison Bailey** published “Reconceiving Surrogacy: toward a Reproductive Justice Account of Indian Surrogacy” in *Hypatia*, special FEAST issue, ed. Diane T. Meyers, Vol. 26(4). She also was featured in “Students Thank Bailey for Challenging Them” in the September issue of ISU’s *Identity: Valuing Our Diversity*, <http://mediarelations.illinoisstate.edu/identity/1011/sept9/bailey.asp>.

**Sherrilyn Billger** published “Is Your Elementary School on a Track for Closure?” with Joe Pacha, Frank Beck, and Norm Durlinger, in *The Illinois School Board Journal*, Vol. 78(5), and presented “What Happens When the Local High School Closes?: ‘Economies of Size’ in Illinois” at the Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, September 24.

**Kyle Ciani** was invited to assess the archive and library holdings at the Sewall-Belmont House & Museum, the historic headquarters of the National Women’s Party, Washington, D.C., and completed the evaluation in June.

**Melissa Oresky** exhibited “Where There Is” at the OQBO Gallery, Berlin, Germany, July; “Parts and Labor” at the Soloway Gallery, Brooklyn, New York, August; and “IAAFBJHMJNMOMRSATSW” at the Fountain Studios, Brooklyn, New York, September.

**Ali Riaz** has been appointed the editor-in-chief of *Studies on Asia*, a biannual interdisciplinary online journal on Asian studies, sponsored by the Midwestern Conference on Asian Affairs.

**Paula Ressler** and Diane Zosky’s “LGBTQ Students Experience Illinois State University as Benignly Heteronormative” was published in *Gausius: Selected Scholarship on Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University 2004-2009*, ed. Kathleen McKinney and Patricia Jarvis (Illinois State University).

**Roberta Seelinger-Trites** published *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children’s Literature*, Chinese edition, trans. Li Li (Hefei: Anhui Children’s Publishing House), and presented “Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Literature for Youth,” with Karen Coats, at Childhood & Globalization: An International Colloquium, Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, IL, September 13.

**Maura Toro-Morn** co-authored “Toward a Feminist Methodological Approach to the Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender: Lessons from Cuba” with Elisa Facio and Anne R. Roschelle, in *Advances in Gender Research*, eds. Vasilickie Demos and Marcia Segal (JAI Press), Vol. 14. In recognition of her commitment to

diversity, she won the Outstanding Faculty Member Award at the Dean of Students Diversity Advocacy Awards Ceremony, April 11.

**Amy Wood** presented “Cinema, Modernity, and the Scandal of Racial Violence in the U.S.” as an invited speaker at the Violence and Visibility Conference, Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany, June. She presented “Film and History: *The Wizard of Oz* and Hollywood in the Great Depression” as the keynote speaker at the Horace Mann Summer Institute for Teachers, Springfield, Illinois, July. Her book, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*, won the Lillian Smith Book Award. ☼

## Student News



On October 4, F.L.A.M.E. brought the Clothesline Project to ISU’s campus. T-shirts displaying individual stories of assault, sexual abuse, incest and/or other forms of violence were displayed to raise awareness about domestic violence.



ISU’s PRIDE participated in “National Coming Out Day” on October 11. LGBTQIA students participated by signing a poster to illustrate their support and raise awareness about human rights and LGBTQI issues.

## WGS Spring Course Offerings

| Required Undergraduate Courses |  |  |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| WGS 120                        | Women, Gender, and Society                       | TR 11-12:15 p.m.<br>TR 12:35-1:50 p.m. |
| ENG 160                        | Women in Literature                              | TR 2-3:15 p.m.                         |
| HIS 262                        | History of Women in the United States since 1865 | MWF 1-1:50 p.m.                        |

| Undergraduate Course Electives |  |  |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| COM/ENG/<br>LAN 128            | Gender in the Humanities                                 | TR 3:35-4:50 p.m.<br>TR 8-9:15 a.m.<br>TR 12:35-1:50 p.m.<br>MWF 9-9:50 a.m.<br>MWF 12-12:50 p.m.<br>MWF 1-1:50 p.m.<br>MW 2-3:15 p.m.<br>MW 4-5:15 p.m. |
| ENG/LAN<br>206                 | Cultural Expressions in Social Contexts                  | TR 9:35-10:50 a.m.   |
| ENG 360*                       | Studies in Women's Writing                               | M 5:30-8:20 p.m.   |
| FCS/HIS/<br>SOA 112            | American Family  | TR 11-12:15 p.m.<br>TR 8-9:15 a.m.<br>TR 2-3:15 p.m.<br>TR 9:35-10:50 a.m.<br>T 5:30-8:20 p.m.<br>MWF 10-10:50 a.m.                                      |
| FCS 222                        | Cultural Diversity in Dress                              | TR 1-2:15 p.m.<br>TR 12:35-1:50 p.m.   |
| FCS 305*                       | Families in Later Life                                   | T 5:30-8:20 p.m.   |
| FCS 327*                       | Clothing and Behavior                                    | TR 1-2:15 p.m.   |
| FCS 333*                       | Family and Consumer Public Policy                        | W 5:30-8:20 p.m.   |
| HIS 330*                       | The Family in History                                    | MW 3-4:15 p.m.   |
| PHI 202                        | Sex, Values, and Human Nature                            | MW 3-4:15 p.m.   |
| POL 338*                       | Gender and Political Theory                              | W 6-8:50 p.m.  |
| PSY/SOA 123                    | Human Sexuality  | MWF 12-12:50 p.m.  |
| SOA 311*                       | Issues in Gerontology                                    | TR 9:35-10:50 a.m.   |
| SOA 341*                       | Sociology of Gender                                      | MW 2-3:15 p.m.   |
| WGS 390                        | Interdisciplinary Research in Women's and Gender Studies | Arrange  |
| WGS 392*                       | LGBTQ Studies & Theory                                   | TR 2-3:15 p.m.   |

(\* Denotes Graduate Certificate electives, too.)

| Required Graduate Courses |                   |         |
|---------------------------|-------------------|---------|
| WGS 400                   | Independent Study | Arrange |

| Graduate Course Electives |                                    |                   |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| SOA 469.13                | Seminar in Sociology of Culture    | MW 2:30-3:45 p.m. |
| SOA 469.14                | Seminar in Class, Power and Status | TR 3:35-4:50 p.m. |



### Eng 360: Studies in Women's Writing Lesbians' and Trans Men's Lives in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literature

M 5:30-8:20 p.m. with Dr. Paula Ressler

We will study 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century lesbian- and trans-themed texts in a variety of genres that reflect multiracial and multiethnic lesbian and trans lives across social classes. We will explore how literature about same-sex desire and gender transfigurations may contribute to the history of ideas and the creation of a more socially just world.

### HIS 307: Gender and Empire

TR 12:35-1:50 p.m.

with Dr. Christine Varga-Harris



In this course we will discuss the place of gender in the construction and preservation of empires by exploring such topics as imperial prescriptions for femininity and masculinity and family life, citizenship concerns, civilizing missions, and the ways in which colonial subjects contested imperial power.



### HIS 330: Family in History A Focus on the Americas

MW 3:00-4:15 p.m.

with Dr. Kyle Ciani

Throughout history families have been considered the core institution in most societies; however, the ways in which a family organizes itself differs within each culture. We will examine the change in these factors over time: interracial relationships, reproductive issues, and concerns regarding how a family could survive, given members' race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion and health.

### WGS 392: LGBT/Queer Studies and Theory

T R 2-3:15 p.m.

with Dr. Rebecca Chase



We will use queer theory as a lens to provide a unique way of looking at the world, and will study how feminisms inform queer theory, with an emphasis on gender and sexuality. Topics will include: history and politics of queer social movements, trans and intersex identities and lives, sexual and gender identities and expressions, and queer cultural criticism.

# 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.

## Sixteenth Annual Women's and Gender Studies Symposium

Friday,  
April 29  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Old Main Room  
Bone Student  
Center

Illinois State  
University

For more information contact Rozel White  
at: (309) 438-2947 or [wgstudies@ilstu.edu](mailto:wgstudies@ilstu.edu)  
or visit our website at:  
[www.womensandgenderstudies.ilstu.edu](http://www.womensandgenderstudies.ilstu.edu)

## Call for Papers

Panels on Friday morning and afternoon  
Lunch at noon  
Keynote Address at 1:00 pm

**Dr. Chandra Mohanty**

**Title TBA**

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

Send papers 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 **January 21, 2011**.

Send to:

Women's and Gender Studies Programming Committee

Illinois State University

Campus Box 4260

Normal, IL 61790-4260

or

submit your proposal to the Women's and Gender Studies office, Rachel Cooper 237.

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*Gender Matters*  
*Illinois State University*  
*Women's and Gender Studies Program*  
*Rachel Cooper 2nd Floor*  
*Campus Box 4260*  
*Normal, IL 61790-4260*

**Welcome, New Minors!**

Erin Cotter, Special Education  
Steph Hatfield, Mass Media, Radio  
Sarah Keene, Psychology  
Beth Offenbecher, Marketing  
Hannah Palmer, Undeclared  
Becca Sack, Undeclared  
Kelsey Schreck, Sociology  
Alexandra White, Marketing

**Welcome, New Concentration Student!**

Kristine Bull, Social Work

**Welcome, New Graduate Certificate Student!**

Starla Southward, Social Work

**Calendar**

- Oct. 29** "Pursuing What Really Matters," YWCA's Week Without Violence keynote address by Judith Valente. Second Presbyterian Church, 313 N. East St., Bloomington, 12 p.m.
- Nov. 3** Women's Mentoring Network Pizza Social. RC 237, 4-5:30 p.m.
- Nov. 4** "Immigration Reform and the Plight of Bi-national Gay and Lesbian Couples," Global Review panel. Vrooman Center, 7 p.m.
- Nov. 10** "The Resurrection of the Flesh: Philosophy, Feminism and Postcolonial Theory," by Dr. Namita Goswami. BSC, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor East Lounge, 12 p.m.