

The Meg Quigley Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Department

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Fieldwork Studies Transform WGSS Students Into True Scholar-Activists

By Jessie Heminway

"It is hard to think of community work that would not augment an education in Women's or Gender Studies" writes Sara Ross '03 as she reflected on her fieldwork study experiences as part of her Women's Studies major at Mills College. *"That time certainly transcended a simple degree requirement."*

Ross explains that learning by reading and writing about underserved communities, about the social inequities afforded to women and children, and about the intersections of class, race and gender will only get an education so far but, *"put some real lives on the line - in front of your face - and all that theory is clarified."*

Putting theory into practice, using practice to inform theory is exactly the intention of the Fieldwork Study requirement for Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) majors. The fieldwork positions are accompanied by a seminar taught by WGSS department head Elizabeth Potter. According to Potter, *"The seminar is an opportunity to explore how fieldwork enhances the content of our classes. We look at the theories and ideas of gender and the feminist approach to gender which informs and enriches the practice, making it feminist practice,"* says Potter.

Potter works with the students to build bridges between an internship experience and the WGSS curriculum - a bridge that WGSS majors, like Mills' WMST majors, expect. *"I always heard the message strong and clear that the 'personal is political' and that Women's Studies was an area of study that came from social movements - so it seemed natural to 'do' fieldwork as a Women's Studies student,"* says Women's Studies Major Tara Dias '01.



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Fieldwork experience also provides students an opportunity to build their resumes and, in some cases, have led to employment after college. Mazy Marx '07 notes that her placement led her directly to her current job and career; *"I reference things I learned during my fieldwork research all the time...it was a great resume and academic builder."* Her fieldwork at the East Oakland Community High School transformed her understanding of both the public school system in Oakland and more specifically minority teen girl culture. She is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Education at Mills and is working full time as a Kindergarten Teacher.

Another Mills graduate, Tiffany Mair '01 described her experience this way: *"Not only did my fieldwork augment my Women's Studies course work and understanding of gender, I have drawn upon experiences I had in this position throughout my entire career - and personal life."*

Angela Moffat '11 believes *"the experience brought depth to my understanding of the course material in Feminist Theory and Feminist Social Ethics in particular."*

And most profoundly, Melinda Zimmer '98, a double major in Women's Studies and PLEA (Political, Legal, and Economic Analysis) described her experience with Executive Director, Barbara Brenner and Breast Cancer Action as *"amazing"*. *"She showed me how to be fearless, intelligent and diplomatic in her advocacy for BCA and for women and men*

"She showed me how to be fearless, intelligent and diplomatic in her advocacy for BCA [Breast Cancer Action] and for Women and Men fighting breast cancer" -- Melinda Zimmer '98

fighting breast cancer. I have used her modeling as a foundation for my own work as an employee and a board member of nonprofit organizations in my career." As a result of her experience, Zimmer established the Zimmer Award, which is presented to a WGSS senior who has demonstrated outstanding academic scholarship and community service.

The Fieldwork Study includes work experience, readings and culminates in a reflection piece presented at the end of the semester. The complete inventory of these reflection pieces dating back to the early nineties are kept in the WGSS offices for others to peruse for ideas and inspiration.

In 1979 the Fieldwork Study course became a requirement for Women's Studies Majors, just two years after the Women's Studies Program was established. When Professor Potter joined Mills she began archiving the reflection papers. More than 50 organizations are represented in the reflection papers, the majority of which were at non-profit organizations. A full 40% of the placements were with various political groups like Rutgers's Center for American Women and Politics and Equal Rights Advocates. Another 19% were original projects that spring up

here on the Mills campus or as an extension of a group research project; 28% of the positions were with teaching organizations like Girls Inc, Motherread and various public school systems. The remaining 35% of the fieldwork placements are served at a wide variety of non-profits both big and small, from The San Francisco Aids Foundation and Naral, Pro-Choice America to BAWAR, Bay Area Women Against Rape and the California Coalition for Women Prisoners.

Students are empowered and inspired when they make the connection between their academic work and work in the real world. The Fieldwork Study experience provides WGSS students with the opportunity to step outside their comfort zone, to make connections between theory and practice and, as Professor Potter explains, to *"transform our students into true scholar-activists."*



Sneak Peak at “Beach Bunny”, Cornelia Nixon’s Next Novel

Editors Note: Professor Cornelia Nixon received a Quigley Fellowship Award this year in order to complete what she hopes to be, the final draft of her new novel “Beach Bunny”. Nixon has been a Professor of English at Mills College since 2000. In 2010 she was awarded the Michael Shaara Prize for Excellence in Civil War Fiction given by the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College for her novel JARRETTSVILLE (also Quigley funded). We are delighted to highlight her work in this issue.

By Cornelia Nixon

I received a Quigley Fellowship this fall to finish the fourth and fifth drafts of what should become my fifth book, the novel, “Beach Bunny,” which is now being read by editors at thirteen New York publishing houses.

“Beach Bunny” develops three young women in the late-1960s California beach-culture, shortly before it begins to turn from the ethos of Playboy magazine and 1950s “Leave-It-to-Beaver” gender-roles, toward the uncharted territory of second-wave feminism and the anti-war movement. Those changes begin to reach my heroines before the end of the novel, but for most of it they are Exhibits A, B and C for why second-wave feminism was needed, as they fall into male-dominant relationships, with side effects that include date-rape, illegal abortion, and mental breakdown.

The point-of-view character is Amelia Earhart Norton, a teenager from suburban Northern California, whose life course has already been altered by the Kennedy assassination and the death of her 18-year-old sweetheart in the first wave of U.S. casualties

in Viet Nam, when she was not quite 16.

What follows in the public sphere—more assassinations, Civil Rights violence, escalation of the unauthorized war, and the near-revolution that transformed this country’s morals and manners if not ultimately its government—only confirms what she already knows of the world’s treachery. Amelia contemplates suicide but discovers a better way to withdraw from the world: she buys a surfboard, attempting to escape the continent and landlocked life. She leaves behind even her name, calling herself Piper, modified from the suggestive nickname (Pipeline) given her by other surfers (all male) because of how she stands on the board—crouched as if in a tube, when she’s just trying to stay upright.

“Beach Bunny” follows Piper to UC Irvine, which she chooses because of its proximity to bigger waves, where she can be more thoroughly pummeled. There she nearly perfects her self-escape, turning into an unsuccessful beach bimbo and joining ranks with two other young women, who introduce her to bleached



hair, pushup bras, Budweiser, cigarettes, and casual sex. Together they get in over their heads with men whose expectations run to sex with more than one of them on any given afternoon, and Piper’s freshman year features several culturally-sanctioned flauntings of her body, including a stint as a college pompom girl, during which she is nominated by a fraternity as Playmate of the Month. She has to borrow a car at midnight to have her friend Candy stitched up after being deflowered by her Philosophy T.A.. Piper has already relinquished her virginity to an older man, and she is soon bamboozled into a ménage a quatre with a tandem surfing team.

How she gets from there to become an independent woman and A+ student is the subject of the novel’s second half. What wakes her up is awareness of political evil, and her connection to her two new

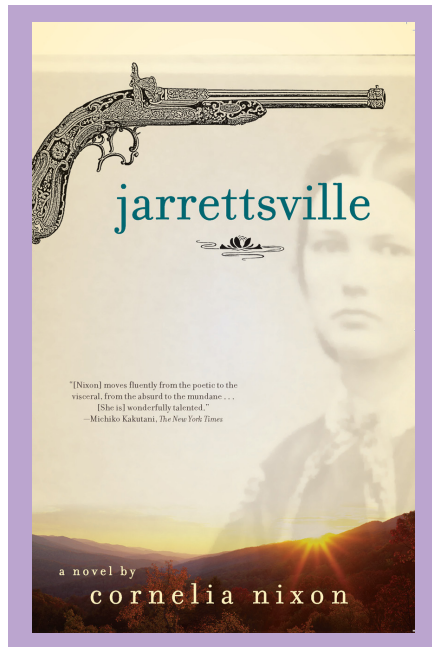
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Cornelia Nixon... continued from previous page

friends—when Candy disappears, she and the other friend drop everything to search for her. I have only recently realized that one of my longtime subjects is the importance of women's friendships, how fraught they can be but also how formative and sustaining.

And all my work to date has centered on the intersection of public and private realities, from my study of D. H. Lawrence's antifeminist reaction during the First World War, Lawrence's Leadership Politics and the Turn Against Women, to my novel *Now You See It*, with its focus on a post-

WWII German-American marriage and anti-Vietnam radicalism, to my second novel, *Angels Go Naked*, which concerns



moral choice in the face of ecological disaster. In my fourth book, *JARRETTSVILLE*, which also received Quigley funding, the Civil War and transition from slavery to emancipation turn what should have been a love story into a tale of betrayal and murder. "Beach Bunny" continues this examination of the effect of history on private life, and I am grateful for the time to work on it more intensively this past fall.

WGSS Department Co-Sponsored Events

Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex: Editors Eric Stanley, Nat Smith and contributors discuss their groundbreaking collection of writings on the intersections of queer, transgender and prison abolitionist politics.

Still Black: A Portrait of Black Transmen with Director Kortney Ziegler: A screening followed by a discussion with the director. This feature-length documentary explores the lives of six black transgender men through intimate discussions of their lives as artists, students, husbands, fathers, lawyers and teachers. (Reviewed in this newsletter)

Let's Talk: What Happens in the Bathroom? Screening of a short documentary, "*It Gets Messy In Here*" and discussion that addressed the intersections of racism, transphobia, homophobia, and xenophobia in gender-segregated bathrooms.

Dr. Susana Cháves-Silverman: Reading from and talk on her latest book, *Our Ubuntu: Scenes from la Cuenca de L.A. & Other Latitudes*. Dr. Cháves-Silverman specializes in gender and sexuality studies autobiography/memoir, Latin American and U.S. Latina/Chicana literature, poetry, and feminist pedagogy.

Worst of the Worst? Queer Investments in Anti-Prison Organizing: Dr. Erica Meiners discusses the relationship between the proliferation of sex offender registries and the growth of a prison industrial complex in the U.S. (Reviewed in fall 2011 WGSS Newsletter)

Ethnic History Months: Including presentations, exhibitions, performances and dinners in celebration of Latina Heritage Month, Native Heritage Month, and Black History Month.

Women's Studies Faculty 2011-2012

Deborah Berman-Santana

Ethnic Studies

Judith Bishop

WGSS

Diane Cady

English

Carlota Caulfield

Spanish Language & Lit

Mario Cavallari

Spanish Language & Lit

Carol Chetkovich

Public Policy

Vivian Chin

Ethnic Studies

Rebekah Edwards

English

Bert Gordon

History

Nalini Ghuman

Music

Margaret Hunter

Sociology

Priya Kandaswamy

WGSS

Edith Kinney

Social Sciences

Ajuan Mance

English

Brinda Mehta

French & Francophone

Ann Metcalf

Anthropology

Melinda Micco

Ethnic Studies

Zohreh Niknia

Economics

Elizabeth Potter

WGSS

Siobhan Reilly

Economics

Moira Roth

Art History

Kirsten Saxton

English

Ruth Saxton

English

Cynthia Scheinberg

English

Julia Oparah

Ethnic Studies

Nancy Thornborrow

Economics

Kathy Walkup

Book Arts

Crowded Screening of *Still Black: A Portrait of Black Transmen* Sparks Complex Dialogue

This film was screened on February 23rd as part of the Queer Studies Lecture Series and co-sponsored by the Ethnic Studies Department, Black Women's Collective, Office of the President, Diversity and Social Justice Resource Center, Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies Department, Queer Studies, Gender Splendor, Spiritual and Religious Life, and Associated Students of Mills College.

By Jessica Glennon-Zukoff '13

On a bizarrely-balmy, late-February evening, Kortney Ziegler's film *Still Black: A Portrait of Black Transmen* was screened for a packed house in the Danforth Lecture Hall. The event was notably well-attended, and hosts Kehontas Rowe ('13) and Professor Ajuan Mance warmly set the stage for what would become a lively and complex dialogue, both on-screen and off. Attendees continued to arrive after lights dimmed and some were forced to sit on the floor as *Still Black* began.

Kortney Ziegler's feature-length 2008 documentary was self-shot over a six-month period in shades of gray, as a metaphor for gender variance, explained Ziegler, who was present at the screening. In the film, Ziegler explores the lives of six black, transgender or transsexual-identified men – Kylar, Ethan, Carl, Jay, Louis, and Rashad. Inspired by traditions of African American storytelling, Ziegler gives each man his own section of the film to tell his story, allowing for tangents and winding accounts of experiences, exemplifying a narrative philosophy of Ziegler's: to present these men as they are by creating a space for them to present themselves.

The men share diverse stories of transgender and transsexual iden-

tity: what it was like to be honored by Harvard University as transgender-identified lawyer yet still struggle to be hired, how they survived emotionally through writing and body art, what it was like to give up various communities in the course of physically transitioning, and, across the board, how they navigate dating and relationships. Particularly striking was Kylar's account of an experience that exemplified a public fear of his race: his wheelchair was stuck in the snow and he was ignored or held at an extreme distance by passersby, the most considerate of whom merely offered to call the police. It was evident to Kylar that he was (now) perceived as a threat as a black man, wheelchair or no.

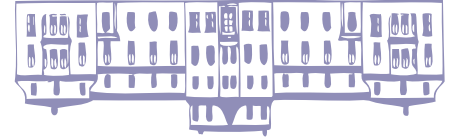
Ziegler expressed being shocked by misogyny spoken to by a few interviewees. For example, Carl, a deacon, admits to having some chauvinist tendencies, specifically when it comes to his wife. In his interview, he expresses appreciation for a 1950s kind of marriage, in which a wife takes care of everything at home. There was some uncomfortable laughter in the Mills audience. Later, during the post-film discussion, some attendees expressed feeling troubled by the expressions of chauvinism in the film and seemed surprised that such sentiment had come from

transmen, whom it was apparently presumed would have a stronger consciousness of gender politics. Carl, in his interview, asserts that he is working on himself.

The inclusion of misogynistic statements and chauvinistic expressions from Carl and others was conscious, Ziegler explained, and done in order to present nuanced portraits of these men.



Indeed, it is the inclusion of these flaws that allows for a human portrait. This film provoked the Mills audience to examine their own projection of feminism onto trans identity. Viewing and processing *Still Black* reminds our community to take people as they present themselves and resist the urge to rewrite another's identity to the benefit of our own politics.



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Find out more about the WGSS Department on the Mills website:
<http://www.mills.edu/academics/undergraduate/wgss>

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Professor Priya Kandaswamy's Sexuality and the City Class