



Prof. Kandaswamy Looks at Sexuality Through The Lens of Social Justice

This fall Professor Priya Kandaswamy joined the faculty of the Women's Studies Program at Mills. She is teaching a number of new courses that examine the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality. Jessie Heminway recently had the opportunity to sit and talk with her.

As an undergraduate you received your BA in Peace and Conflict Studies and Molecular and Cell Biology. How did you start there and end up in Ethic Studies, and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies?

I started in the sciences because I was interested in health issues, but as I learned more, I began to see health more and more through the lens of social justice. I had some amazing teachers at UC Berkeley who introduced me to a whole new way of seeing the world. Radical social movements such as anti-colonization struggles, abolition, and women of color feminism particularly inspired me. These movements really challenge us to build a fundamentally different kind of world, and once I began to look at the world this way, I realized that I wanted to do something where I would always be engaged in that kind of thinking.

*This fall you are teaching **Race, Sexuality and the State**. What is the number one thing that you would you like Mills students take away from this course?*

Well, my goal is that students make connections between struggles for racial equality and struggles for sexual freedom. The class focuses on issues that have not always been seen as central to queer studies, like immigration policy, welfare policy, and the criminal justice system. I want students to see the way that the regulation of race and the regulation of sexuality have been deeply connected in U.S. history.



So, if a student is not a women's studies major/minor or not politically minded what might they gain by taking this course?

The class gives historical context to a lot of issues that are at the forefront of U.S. politics right now. As residents of the U.S., we are all affected by state policies around immigration, welfare and prisons. I think it is really important that we understand those policies so that we can effectively challenge the injustices they produce.

Much of your research is historical. How do you situate that research within queer studies?

Queer studies often has a reputation of being very white and very Western in focus. I think one way that you can challenge this tendency is through historical work. For example, in my historical research on the regulation of black women's sexuality in the late 1800s during Reconstruction, what became apparent to me was that this was a moment in history when norms around heterosexuality were actually being created, and they weren't being produced against the category of homosexuality but rather against a racialized construction of black women's sexuality. Now, from today's vantage

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point, these women would probably not be considered queer. However, queer studies might learn a great deal from exploring the ways they were constructed as sexually deviant.

Can you give us an example of how your research contributes to contemporary debates about sexuality and citizenship?

One example would be the work I have done on the gay marriage movement in the U.S. In that research, I put the legalization of gay marriage in the larger context of a racism and sexism. I talk about how the institution of marriage both reinforces heterosexuality as “normal” sexuality and how marriage has been used to maintain the subordination of people of color. For example, arguing that access to legal marriage would provide gays and lesbians with things like access to healthcare through a spouse skirts the larger question of universal access to health care. This is particularly significant given that people of color are far less likely to have jobs with health benefits.

Another example would be the book manuscript that I am current working on.

In it, I compare discourses about sexuality in forced labor projects that were directed at Black women during Reconstruction with discourses about sexuality that were used to support “welfare reform” and the institutionalization of workfare programs in the mid-1990s. My hope in this project is to both illustrate the way that centering black women’s experiences might radically transform how we understand citizenship itself and to make connections between the regulation of sexuality and the control of women of color’s labor in the U.S.

How does this research inform the classes that you teach?

My research is very much about developing ways to think about structures like race, class, gender and sexuality together in different historical and geographic contexts,



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and I think this is the central question in my classes as well. In addition, one of the things I’ve learned through my research and that I try to implement in my classes is the importance of interdisciplinarity. I don’t think that there is one singular truth about any given social phenomenon but that different approaches illuminate different aspects of that phenomenon so I tend to use a lot of different kinds of texts so that students might get a sense of the different textures of a social problem.

Do you have particular teaching methods that work for you? How do you get class discussions going?

I try to do a variety of things in the classroom such as lectures, working in small groups, discussions structured around student-generated questions, and student-facilitated discussions. My hope is that students’ interests will drive my classes and so I try to provide a lot of opportunities for students to provide input and direction to the course.

*Next semester, in the spring you are teaching two new courses at Mills: **Transnational Sexualities** and **Sexuality and the City**. What are you hoping to do with each of these courses? Why should Mills Students take these courses?*

In *Transnational Sexualities*, we will look at how transnational processes such as colonialism and globalization interact with local practices to shape sexual identities.

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**Women's Studies Faculty
2010-2011**

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Ethnic Studies

JoAnne Bernstein
Art History

Judith Bishop
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Social Science

WGSS at Mills

The Women's Studies Program proposes to become a Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies Department (WGSS) with minors in Women's Studies and Queer Studies effective Fall, 2011.

"We are very excited about the transition to a WGSS Department and are confident our proposal will be approved by the faculty," explains Professor Elizabeth Potter, Program Head. "There is high student demand and strong faculty support for gender and queer studies here at Mills."

Women's Studies pioneered the interdisciplinary study of gender and sexuality in the 1960s and, as Professor Potter points out, "It is logical to expand the program at Mills to reflect the growth of these original studies, particularly the growth of Queer Studies."

"Mills students, who care so much about the historical, cultural and scientific issues related to women, gender and sexuality, will be well served by rigorous academic

investigation of them," states Professor Potter. The proposed major will include courses in all these areas.

Professor Kandaswamy considers the Introduction to Queer Studies course an important component of the WGSS major "because it gets students to think about sexuality in terms of power. In our society, we often think about sexuality as something natural or private. Queer Studies challenges this way of viewing sexuality, and instead gets students to think about sexuality as political. Students learn to analyze the role sexuality plays in issues ranging from globalization to the health care system to the criminal justice system."

The process of transforming the Women's Studies Program into a WGSS Department will not be complete until next spring at which time new courses and major/minor requirements will be announced. Stay Tuned!

Homegirl Goes To Mills

Cristina Mariscal's Field Work Study with *Homeboy Goes to Harvard*

In 2007, Women's Studies major Cristina Mariscal faced one of the biggest challenges of her life - going back to school. Cristina, like many Latina girls, grew up in a world where stories of single parent households, gang violence, drugs and alcohol, and teen pregnancy are all too common. As a young person, she had little or no support or mentorship and was plagued by low self-esteem and the feeling that she was not meant to succeed.

However, unlike many, Cristina had the strength of character and determination to break out of the stereotype that defined her by going back to school. As a teenager Cristina started dancing with *Danza Cuauhtonal*, a traditional indigenous Aztec dance circle, which provided her with many things. Among them was a physical outlet for her teenage angst, adult mentorship and a connection with her own Mexican heritage. It was through the dance circle that she met Richard Santana, a nationally recognized speaker who talks to marginalized, "high-risk" youth, and the founder of *Homeboy Goes to Harvard*. His message centers around overcoming challenges and breaking cycles of violence. He encouraged Christina to become a speaker, to tell her story and to help girls like her change the course of their lives.

Cristina's first reaction was shock, "What was I going to say that would motivate young women of color?" she wanted to know. "Richard felt that I had an important a story to tell. He said my resiliency and perseverance needed to be shared with other girls who are in the same situation as I was when I was a "high-risk" youth."

Richard encouraged Cristina to tell her story so that young women of color might see themselves in her story and to see the importance of education.

Four years later, Cristina agreed to take on the task and it became her Field Work Study project.

She found the process difficult. She had to reflect on her life experiences both good and bad; her stories of abuse; her stories of neglect. After a lot of struggle and many tears, she developed a large, assembly-style presentation accompanied by three small-group activities. She also became the first woman speaker and storyteller for *Homeboy Goes to Harvard*.

Cristina's hour-long presentation is centered on the story of her life; a story that includes descriptions of her experience growing up in a single-family household where her mom worked two jobs, her sister had 3 children by the time she was 21, and her brother, a heroin addict since he was 17, lived in the prison system. "I talk about how I raised myself and encountered many injustices and violent acts. I talk about feeling alone and having no one to talk



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One of the primary goals of the class is to think about the kinds of identities that become visible if we try to consider sexual practices outside of the West on their own terms outside of the structure of western definitions.

Another goal of the class is to develop a transnational analysis of activism around sexuality and to situate that activism in the context of critiques of nationalism, imperialism and globalization.

Within queer studies, there has been considerable work that connects urbanization and the development of queer identities and communities. In *Sexuality and the City*,

“So far, I’ve been very impressed by Mills students, and I’m looking forward to learning a great deal from them in the years to come”

we’ll look at some of those histories and also think about some of the conflicts around sexuality that emerge in contemporary urban politics. Some of the issues we’ll

examine include spatial segregation, redevelopment and gentrification, access to public space, and policing and criminalization within those spaces.

I love this teaching goal “I see teaching as fundamentally linked to a politics of social justice in that through teaching I hope to provide my students with the intellectual tools to develop and act on their own vision of what a just world might look like.” How have you seen this manifest itself in one of your classes?

I think this is more of a long-term goal, and I’ve only been at Mills a couple of months now so it’s hard to say. At my previous job, I taught a class on race, gender and prisons in the U.S. The class drew a really diverse range of students from criminologists and anti-prison activists to students who had family members that worked as prison guards and students who had family members in prison or who had been in prison themselves, all in one class. As a teacher, I was really struck by the creative and thoughtful ways these students developed to communicate with each other across what are often constructed as unbridgeable divides. It wasn’t always the most comfortable class, but it was one of the best classes because I really felt like in engaging the material students were learning to articulate a complicated analysis of the world together. In many ways, I had very little to do with it. It was mostly their work and their very inspiring ability to rise to a challenging situation. So far, I’ve been very impressed by Mills students, and I’m looking forward to learning a great deal from them in the years to come.

What Professor Kandaswamy’s Students are saying:

“The readings we did in the first half of *Race, Sexuality and the State* have consistently changed the way I think about things in a really big way. She has challenged us to think about the way that social justice movements have taken a “rights-based” approach to dealing with the state, and how that often leads to increased and regulatory state intervention in our lives. As an activist, this has really challenged me to reconsider the strategies that I’ve been thinking of as viable and appropriate for accomplishing social justice goals. I appreciate that the things that I’m learning in her class have clear, real world applications; it’s not just theory for the sake of theory.” -- Nia King

“Professor Kandaswamy’s class is really good. She provides a unique perspective on women’s studies through the lens of the state. It’s a women’s studies class, but she draws on a lot of material from basic government classes to provide unique insight. The topics are engaging and relevant, such as immigration and the military. Prof. Kandaswamy herself is very helpful and knowledgeable. I’m working on my thesis in international relations and she’s helped me a lot, even though she’s not my advisor. I think as she gets integrated into the Mills community she will be an invaluable professor.” -- Suzan Boulad

“There is no divide between community activism happening now and what she is teaching in the classroom. I think she is awesome” - Sonny Duncan

“Dr. Kandaswamy is a great teacher! She is always there to help her students, and she wants them to succeed.” -- Amanda Hanhan

Prize Winners Spring 2010

◆◆ The Women’s Studies Writing Contest ◆◆

The Women’s Studies Writing Contest is awarded to the best essay or non-fiction paper pertaining to women’s issues.

Linnea Linde

For her essay: *Eugenic Sterilization In the United States: Race, Class, Gender, and Population Control*

◆◆ The Zimmer Prize ◆◆

The Zimmer Prize is awarded to a Women’s Studies senior who has demonstrated outstanding scholarship and community service.

Miriam Noriega

2010 Summer Quigley Grant Recipients

Elmaz Abinader – to work on her novel: *When Silence is Frightening, A Novel of War and Peace*. This is a novel about the stories people carry inside of them. She will be travelling to Lebanon to research her character Dede who has survived the Lebanese Civil War.

Carlota Caufield – to continue her work on two essays about the poetry and prose of the Argentinean poet Alejandra Pizarnik.

Vivian Chin – to work on her research on narratives of Diasporas in literature and film with particular attention on work produced by Asian Diasporic writers.

Christie Chung - to extend her research on the impact of weight consciousness and circadian arousal on memory in young college women to include older women. Recent research suggests

that weight consciousness affect women throughout their lifespan.

Nalini Ghuman - to assist with the costs of the additional research I'd like to do towards a proposed monograph of the life and pioneering work of Maud McCarthy.

Brinda Mehta - to do research at the Institut du monde arabe (Institute of Arab Studies) in Paris for the fourth chapter her current project, *Gendered Resistance: The Creative Voices of Arab Women*.

Rachael Stryker – to collaboratively design, print, and distribute a user-friendly legal education resource for female parolees in the state of California who have recently had their parole revoked. This is part of an ongoing collaborative public interest ethnography project

conducted between Mills students and the local non-profit, *Proyecto Common Touch*.

Priya Shimpi – to expand an ongoing research project examining adult women's perspectives on play. The current study grows out of Dr. Shimpi and Dr. Nicholson's combined years of experience teaching adult women about the importance of play in child development.

Sabrina Zirkel – to include an additional "wave" of data collection for her study on the issues of gender in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) education where she and her colleagues will look at what cues in the STEM learning environments that depress women's outcomes and serve to identify ways that they may be altered and outcomes buttressed.

Cristina Mariscal's Field Work Study with Homeboy Goes to Harvard

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to when I hit puberty, and how I was misinformed by peers. I talk about a life that was filled with violence, drugs and alcohol and how I barely graduated high school," describes Cristina. Her story also includes quitting a job that she loved because she found she was training incoming, inexperienced new hires who made more money than she did. They made more money because they had a college degree. And that's how Cristina found her way to Mills.

"Initially, talking about my very personal experiences was hard to do", reveals Cristina, "but as it evolved, I felt myself begin to heal. Now the traumas no longer have power over me. Now I am able to flourish and tell my story to countless numbers of girls who feel, like I felt, that they are not meant to succeed and do not see higher education as a possibility."

Cristina tells her story to audiences of young men and women. She finds that the large assembly format is great for young men who hear a perspective common to many, many young women involved in gang violence and self-destructive behavior. "They often feel uncomfortable when they recognize their own violent behavior towards women," says Christina. However, large assemblies don't reach young women in the same way. They are not intimate or safe enough. "I prefer to talk to Latina girls and women in small groups. As I work, I am encouraged by the incredible hope and potential I see in these women. I suppose I can see myself in them as well."

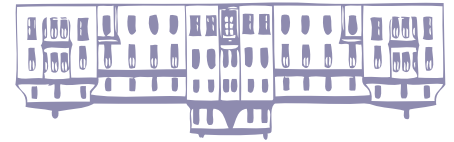


She begins her small group activities by forming a circle and giving the girls statistics about Latinas and teen pregnancy like, 52% of Latina women get pregnant before 21 and 1 in 4 Latina girls drop out of school when they become pregnant. According to Cristina, the numbers don't make a significant impact until she asks the girls stand up if they are, or know, a teenage mother. When the majority of participants stand, "they are in awe," says Ms. Mariscal.

In the small group environment, many young women tell their own stories of victimization and sexual abuse. "These violations create a tornado of emotions and negative behaviors", says Cristina. "While some girls become very aggressive and turn to violence, other girls become promiscuous or passive. As a result, these girls are often more prone to fighting than the boys. The young Latina women I see manifest their victimization through violence and many times turn to violent, unhealthy relationships", explains Cristina. "These relationships lead to children born to teenage mothers. These issues are all very close to my heart." In small groups it is easier for Cristina to pinpoint and acknowledge how early life experiences contribute to self-destructive behaviors.

Though Cristina usually has only two to three sessions with each group, they are usually filled with deep emotion; genuine laughter coexists with moments of deep sadness and ugly truths. "I think simply having a safe space where the girls have the opportunity to ask all the uncomfortable

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The Meg Quigley
Women's Studies Program
5000 MacArthur Blvd.
Oakland, CA 94613

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Cristina Mariscal

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questions they want, without being judged or given the wrong information is vital in creating confident, knowledgeable young Latinas”, reflects Cristina. “The more motivated and conscious these young women become, the more likely they are to pursue education and postpone pregnancy and promote self-awareness.”

Cristina offers the support and guidance she would have liked to have when she was young. The group discussions include activities on the myths and facts of birth control in addition self-esteem, self-respect, self-reflection, self-awareness and empowerment. “When I speak to young Latina girls, I talk to them as I would talk to my daughters. I acknowledge all the beauty and strengths that they have,

while focusing on the importance of knowledge about their bodies. I teach self-advocacy as a tool to success. This work is both gratifying and empowering, both for the girls and myself”, reveals Cristina. “I want each girl to leave my group with a sense of empowerment and be motivated to pursue positive outcomes for their future.” Though much of the funding for the work Cristina does has evaporated, she still believes it is her job to give back to her community.

Cristina has four children, has been the head of *Danza Cuauhtonal* for the last 10 years and was just recently hired as a Health Educator by La Clinica de la Raza in Fruitvale. She is planning to graduate from Mills in the spring.

The Meg Quigley Women's Studies Program at Mills College

Women's Studies Program Chair:

Dr. Elizabeth Potter

Phone: 510.430.2233

Email: wmst@mills.edu

Newsletter Editor:

Jessie Heminway



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