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## Gender and Women's Studies Newsletter for Summer 2013

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE:

BUSY AND PRODUCTIVE YEAR FOR GENDER AND WOMEN'S STUDIES



The 2012-2013 academic year for Gender and Women's Studies has been so busy and thriving, we've had to wait until summer for a pause to publish our GWS Newsletter. This year, counting August 2013 commencement, we've graduated 18 students. Our major has grown to over 56 people, making us one of the largest GWS Programs in the country. We are also officially expanding our major to the Providence campus.

GWS is also proud to be working with Director Annie Russell of the LGBTQ Center toward the establishment of a new "Gender Equity and Leadership in Sexuality" Living and Learning Community (LLC) in Tower C of Ellery Hall starting in Fall 2013. This LLC will focus on developing a safe and supportive environment for all people at URI, improving campus climate, addressing issues of equity, and exploring concepts

related to gender and sexuality

In another significant move, GWS major Katie Gallagher has done the organizing to receive Student Senate recognition to create "URI Students for Gender Equality," an organization committed to "sparking discourse and generating action in re-sponse to pervasive gender inequality on local, national, and global levels." According to Gallagher, "the organization will serve as a platform for like-minded students to organize and engage in activism and advocacy for social justice issues that will ultimately serve to further the advancement of gender equality." Prof. Helen Mederer (Sociology) will be the faculty mentor.

In terms of other news, this year we welcomed a new faculty member, Dr. Ping Xu, who has a joint position with Political Science and Gender and Women's Studies and taught GWS 325 (International Women's Issues) in the spring.

We also welcomed back from sabbatical Dr. Donna Hughes, a world-renowned expert on human and sex trafficking.

GWS lectures were well attended across campus. For each lecture and event, the generous URI co-sponsorship from several departments and Colleges bespeaks the shared interest in and commitment to investigate gender and women's studies issues.

One of our renowned speakers and visitors to GWS classes this year was Dacia Maraini, one of

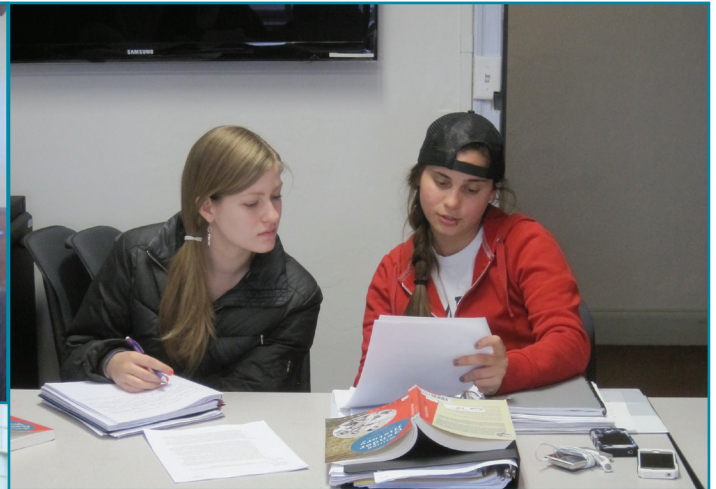
the finest Italian woman writers alive today. Maraini, invited as a Distinguished International Scholar, has won, among others, the Campiello and Strega Prizes, which are the most prestigious Italian literature awards. In 2012 Maraini was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Her URI talks included "Why do I Write?" and "From Convent to Brothels, Women's Writers." URI also celebrated on March 1st International Women's Day with a panel that included presentations by Maraini and Professors Lisberger, Hughes, and Xu, among others. A play-reading of her work added to the excitement of having her also visit the GWS Capstone class and Honors "Women Writing Their Lives" class to share her

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# 2012-2013 WAS A PRODUCTIVE YEAR FOR THE GWS PROGRAM!



## A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

I am thrilled to present the summer edition of the 2013 GWS Newsletter. This was my first time serving as editor (of anything!), and I am so grateful for the support of Jody Lisberger and Devlin Healey.

This past year was my first year as a graduate teaching assistant with the GWS Program. It has been a marvelous and exciting year. I am currently pursuing a Master's degree in the Developmental Science Program in Human Development and Family Studies, as well as working on a graduate certificate in GWS. My research interests include trauma and resilience, disability and sexuality, and young motherhood. I'm also a single mom to a precocious 4-year-old boy, Eli, who I am currently homeschooling for kindergarten.

~Anna Vaccaro

I want to thank Jody Lisberger and Anna Vaccaro for letting me help out with the publication of this newsletter. I spent the spring semester studying English at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, and really missed the GWS community here at URI! It's been great to jump right back into the fun! This fall I'll be a senior Gender and Women's Studies, English, and Psychology major.

~Devlin Healey



From left: Anna Vaccaro and Devlin Healey

# "CROSSING BORDERS": STUDENTS ATTEND RADCLIFFE CONFERENCE ON IMMIGRATION AND GENDER

BY KATHERINE DAY

At 6 a.m. on April 26, students and faculty from the URI Gender and Women's Studies Program (GWS) and Political Science (PSC) boarded a bus to Cambridge to attend "Crossing Borders: Immigration and Gender in the Americas," an all-day conference organized by the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, a branch of Harvard University.

This trip, like the 2012 Radcliffe Conference "Women Making Democracy: The Arab Spring," which GWS and PSC students and faculty also attended, was funded by the Provost and Dean of Arts & Sciences, Winnie Brownell.

The conference brought together professors, students, intellectuals, and immigrants to discuss the ways immigration and the policy surrounding it affects our lives, as well as the social and legal implications of being an immigrant in the United States. The conference looked closely at how race, gender, and class intersect in creating immigration policy and attitudes and affect future generations.



The importance of understanding the past, present, and future of the issues surrounding immigration, as discussed by the panelists, cannot be understated. To begin the conference, keynote speaker and journalist Sonia Nazario discussed *Enrique's Journey*, her fictional account and reliving of a young man's journey through Guatemala, Mexico, and the US, penniless and hungry, risking life and limb riding on the tops of freight trains to find his mother in the United States.

This moving and emotional tale set the tone for the conference, beginning us on our path to truly contemplate the position of immigration in the United States.

The panel on "The Gendering of International Migration" gave us a clearer perspective on the ways female immigration has been misunderstood and misrepresented; the Panel on "Law, Asylum, and Sending Countries" depicted the present legal complications facing immigrants in the United States as well as how those policies reinforce social divisions among people living in the United States; the panel on "the Children of Immigrants" highlighted very real and present concerns, and the way policy will affect the lives of millions of children living in the United States right now.

The highlight of the conference was not only the insightful and articulate scholars and students working to change immigration policy in the United States, but the several "Dreamers" who also attended and spoke.

Dreamers are young people from across the country who live openly under an undocumented status and do so, like generations of young activists before



them, in hopes of changing both  
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## MEET DR. PING XU, THE NEW ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN GENDER AND WOMEN'S STUDIES AND POLITICAL SCIENCE



Above, Dr. Ping Xu speaks about her experiences growing up in China for “Out of Diversity: We Speak” during Diversity week.

This past fall, we had the honor of welcoming Dr. Ping Xu as a joint assistant professor in GWS and Political Science. Dr. Xu is from Yichang, China, but was mostly recently living in Louisiana. She received her PhD from Louisiana State University in the summer of 2012. Her research interests include political economy, Chinese politics, inequality, immigration, the welfare state, and social movements. Professor Xu’s work has been published in both Chinese and English.

**Can you tell us about your hometown in China?**

**Ping:** My hometown, Yichang, is a beautiful city on the Yangtze River. It has a population of around 4 million, with about 1 million in the urban area and 3 million in rural areas. The city is very modern and it is famous for its beautiful scenery. The “Three Georges Dam Project,” also located in my hometown, is supposed to be the largest water dam project in the world.

**What do you miss most about China?**

**Ping:** My family are all still living in China. Chinese people are very family oriented. Traditionally, grandparents, parents, and children all live in the same household, or at least live close by. My grandfather, four of my father’s siblings, two of my mother’s siblings, and their families all live within five minutes of each other (on the same street)! I miss living close by my family and relatives. Besides that, food is the other thing that I miss a lot. I miss my friends as well, who are scattered around the world; fortunately, we can skype with each other whenever we want to.

**Can you tell us about a particular project or accomplishment that you consider to be significant in your career?**

**Ping:** One project that I am proud that I was involved in was my volunteer work in the aftermath of the 5.2 earthquake in China in 2008. I was working in a disaster management research institute in Louisiana State University at that time. My former co-workers from a Chinese institute founded a NGO called “Wenchuan Earthquake Taskforce” to provide help in the aftermath of the earthquake. I joined the think tank; with my colleagues we helped in every aspect possible, including psychological counseling of school children, consultation for the understaffed Red Cross, providing policy suggestions for the central government ministries and departments. I wrote two policy suggestions that were adopted by the group and later the ministries. It was a life-trans-

forming experience for me.

**What was it like teaching GWS this past year? How was/is it similar to your other PSC classes? Different from them?**

**Ping:** I really enjoyed teaching GWS 325: International Women’s Issues this past semester. I was so impressed by my class—the students were motivated, passionate, and enthusiastic about what they learn. I assigned my students to write up weekly reading memos and comment on them. I have learned a lot from them, not only on the subject matter, but also on how to effectively teach and communicate with them. I think GWS students are driven by what they believe, and they’re also very keen to speak up.

**What are some of the most important things you hope your students learn from your classes?**

**Ping:** I hope my students learn to jump out of the “ethnocentric” circle every now and then. I notice that many young college students tend to believe that their way of doing things is the only right way. Therefore, they do not even want to understand why things could be done in a different way before judging it as wrong. I often tell my students that they will become world leaders and make an impact on the world; therefore they should try to establish an understanding of how and why things are done similarly and differently in other parts of the world. Only if they have a fuller understanding of the phenomenon can they be equipped

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# THE NEW “FEMALE SEXUAL DYSFUNCTION”

BY ANNA VACCARO

## WHO HAS THE POWER TO DEFINE “NORMAL SEXUALITY”?

On April 17, 2013, Dr. Leonore Tiefer spoke about “The New ‘Female Sexual Dysfunction’: A Story of Medicalization, Disease Mongering, and Resistance” for our annual Schweers Lecture on Women’s Health. Tiefer is a feminist, author, researcher, psychologist, therapist, activist, and educator specifically concerned with the medicalization of women’s sexuality. She is currently Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at both the New York University School of Medicine and Albert Einstein College of Medicine. She also has a private psychotherapy and sex therapy practice in Manhattan, New York.

In her talk at URI, Tiefer asked us to consider how women’s sexuality is negatively impacted when it is constructed through the process of medicalization. Through this politicized process of dictating normal versus abnormal sexual functions, Tiefer argued, the selling of “female sexual dysfunction” becomes dichotomized, normalized, generalized, and then sensationalized. This process potentially leads to devastating consequences for women’s bodies, as it impacts the diseases we are diagnosed with, the medicines we are willing to take, and the treatments we are willing to undergo in order to correct what we are told is wrong with us.

Tiefer also challenged us to question the politics of knowledge. In a world of capitalism, privatization, and medicalization, she asked us to consider who might be given the power to define “normal sexuality.” If “the experts” on sexual functions and dysfunctions have ties to pharmaceutical companies with vested interests in capitalizing on common sexual difficulties, how are women particularly vulnerable to exploitation? With this in mind, Tiefer encouraged the audience to challenge medical hegemony—because, as she pointed out with historical and contemporary examples, it is much easier to dictate areas of disease and to prescribe medication than to recognize and address the immense, intersecting sociopolitical factors that play into female sexuality.

Rather than medicalizing female sexuality as a binary of normal versus abnormal or healthy versus ill, Tiefer argued that it is more productive to examine contextual factors that influence female sexual functions and dysfunctions, including medicalization trends, over-sexualization in media, inadequate sex education that too often leads to sexual ignorance and shame, the normalization of pornography, and a lack of knowledge about genital and sexual variation. By analyzing these issues with a feminist perspective, we can begin to see how female sexuality in particular can be detrimentally impacted by the social construction of gendered health.

If you are interested in learning more about Tiefer’s work, please visit [www.sellingsickness.com](http://www.sellingsickness.com).



# GWS SPONSERS DIVERSITY WEEK EVENTS 2012

## LESLÉA NEWMAN: "HE CONTINUES TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE: THE STORY OF MATTHEW SHEPARD"

On October 3rd, Lesléa Newman gave an anti-bullying presentation. She talked about Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old gay student from the University of Wyoming who was brutally murdered in 1998. Her presentation used poetry, photographs, and creative visualization to remind audience members that we all can—and must—make a difference to create a safe world for everyone. Later that night, she gave a fiction reading at the Hillel Center from her book *A Letter to Harvey Milk*.

Newman is the author of sixty books for adults and children. She has been a gay activist for more than twenty years, and she has received the James Baldwin Award for Culture Achievement, the Continuing the Legacy of Stonewall Award, and the Hachamat Lev Award for "enduring commitment to justice and full inclusion for GLBT people in the Jewish community and beyond."



This year's speakers, from left: Dr. Alana Bibeau (Gender and Women's Studies and Sociology); David Howard (Theatre); Thupten Tendhar (Center for Non-violence and Peace Studies); Andrew Karanikolis (Political Science); Gianelle Alba (Sociology); Alyssa Mroz (Gender and Women's Studies); Indrawati Liauw (Developmental Science in Human Development and Family Studies); and Dr. Ping Xu (Political Science and Gender and Women's Studies).

## "OUT OF DIVERSITY: WE SPEAK"

"Some days, I still find myself in a strange limbo between not being 'Asian enough' to belong, and not being 'White enough' for either respective group of people... I think our roots of who we are only begin to grow where we choose to plant them, and are tended by those who nurture us." ~ALYSSA MROZ

"I first learned what diversity was when I was told at a young age that my going to college was unrealistic. I first learned what diversity was when I looked through a college brochure and there weren't any pictures with anyone who looked like me in it... I wasn't like those kids in the pictures, throwing a Frisbee on their quad, getting candid pictures snapped while they had such an enjoyable, privileged time. I realized that not only was I different, but my school-mates and friends from around the way were different. And I wondered how many of them were told they couldn't go to college, let alone make it far enough to graduate high school."

~GIANELLE ALBA

## DR. PING XU DISCUSSES FEMINISM AND MOVE TO URI



Above, Dr. Xu (on left) participated in a traditional Chinese dance performance at URI to celebrate the Chinese New Year.

*Ping Xu continued from page 4*

to make a judgment and provide solutions.

### **What does feminism mean to you?**

**Ping:** It means empowering women to pursue equal status and rights with men in today's world. For me, it is not just a word in a textbook. I try to utilize it whenever I can, i.e., when I teach my students about phenomenons of gender inequality around the world, or when I converse with my colleagues/friends/family about my own beliefs about women/men relations, or when I sit with a group of women in my hometown and tell them that instead of being bound by traditional values of being a good wife, they should consider leaving their husbands if they're abusive or are drug addicts.

### **How does being a political scientist help shape your concerns for gender and women in the world?**

**Ping:** Women's participation in politics directly determines their equal rights and equal status in today's world. Being a political scientist only strengthens my belief in such a statement, such as when I watched Wendy Davis' 13-hour filibuster speech, or when I read about Liberian women organizing nonviolent peace protests, or when I introduce to my students the story of Alice Paul and her friends gaining voting rights for American women.

### **What inspired you to pursue work in political science and gender and women's studies?**

**Ping:** My personal experiences. I am the second child to my parents. According to the One-Child Policy, my parents were not supposed to have a second child. In order to have me, my family had to pay four times the amount of my dad's annual salary as a social compensation fee. At that time, the Chinese society still had a strong son preference. Everyone thought I was a boy since my parents paid such a large amount of money for my birth. In order not to "disappoint" all the relatives, my dad had to silently agree that I was a boy until they discovered it themselves. Although my parents and grandparents love me and my sister dearly, I felt the inequality and to some extent injustice that women in my home country had to face. I want to change my own destiny as well as theirs.

### **What has been the most exciting part of moving to Rhode Island? The most challenging?**

**Ping:** The most exciting part has to be my colleagues at URI. I was surprised how nice, sweet, and

helpful my colleagues at the university are. They have provided me with invaluable advice, help, mentorship, and a sense of community. The most challenging part is the weather, especially the SNOW! It was the first time ever that I had to dig my car out of the snow this past winter. RI is the coldest place that I have lived so far, and I hope I will adjust to it soon.

### **What do you like to do when you are not teaching or researching?**

**Ping:** I love to cook and enjoy inventing my own recipes. I cook a lot of Chinese, Mexican, and Italian foods; most excitingly, I have learned how to cook lobsters, little necks, and mussels. I also like meeting up friends in coffee shops and working out in the gym.



Above, Dr. Xu asks a question of panelists at the "Crossing Borders: Immigration and Gender in the Americas" conference at Radcliffe in April. See page 3 to learn more about the conference, which was attended by GWS and PSC students.



"ONE DAY THE HEROIC WOMEN OF IRAN WILL HAVE THEIR RIGHTS":  
EXCERPT FROM SPEECH GIVEN BY PROFESSOR DONNA HUGHES IN PARIS ON  
MARCH 10, 2013 FOR  
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY CELEBRATION

I have an extraordinary message from the women political prisoners in Zahedan Central Prison in southeast Iran. On the occasion of International Women's Day, they send their greetings to all women around the world, especially Iranian women. They call for all political prisoners to be freed. They smuggled this message out of prison at great risk to themselves.

Today, I want to focus on one woman who spent over 35 years of her life being a warrior against religious fascism in Iran. Five of those years, she was a political prisoner.

In 1979, when the revolution took place, Pوران Najafi was in high school in a northern city of Iran. She joined the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran when she was 17 years old. When the leader of the Mojahedin, Massoud Rajavi, came to her city to make a speech, she distributed leaflets and helped to organize the event.

In 1981, Pوران and a friend were arrested and imprisoned for suspected resistance activities. Over the next five years, she was moved from prison to prison. Wherever she was at, she helped organize the women she was with. She helped them stay strong, to resist the guards. And she helped women escape.

Later, after she was free, Pوران wrote a memoir of her time as a political prisoner. It is entitled *Flight from Bondage*. She used every opportunity to try to escape. Despite several failed attempts, she never gave up. When she could not escape herself, she helped her friends escape.

At another time, Pوران was imprisoned in Evin Prison, a notorious prison in Tehran. Pوران was eventually freed from prison and went to join other members of the Iranian resistance in Camp Ashraf in eastern Iraq.

Over the last two days, we have heard about the shameful broken promises of the United States and the United Nations, and of the complicity of the head of United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq, Martin Kobler, and the Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, with Iran. Over 3,000 members of the Mojahedin, including 1,000 women, were pressured to move to a substandard, unprotected camp, called Liberty, in Baghdad. Protective barriers around the trailers were removed, making the unarmed people vulnerable to attack.

On February 9, 2013, the camp was shelled with rockets by a militia in Iraq created by the Iranian regime, and it appears, with the knowledge of the Iraqi government. Pوران Najafi was one of seven unarmed people, and the only woman, murdered in the attack. We need to demand an investigation into this attack and murder of people with protected person status and guarantees of safety from the United States and the United Nations. We need to demand the perpetrators be held accountable.

Pوران Najafi was a brave woman who dedicated her life to the cause of freedom and dignity. She faced down the torturers in prison. She helped women survive by boosting their morale and keeping them strong. She assisted women to escape from prison. And she worked with other women in the Mojahaden to one day overthrow the Iranian regime.

And that time is coming. From inside Iran, we are hearing that women are fighting back against the daily harassment by police in the street. Women are overcoming their fear of the authority of the Revolutionary Guards. As women become bolder, the regime will lose its authority on the street.

Women like Pوران Najafi laid the groundwork starting decades ago. She never gave up. Pوران died for the freedom of women in Iran. It is going to be others who will have to finish the job.

I have a message for the mullahs and Revolutionary Guards: The women are rising up. They will achieve dignity and freedom. And as the women from Zahedan Central Prison in Iran wrote: "One day the heroic women of Iran will have their rights."



Dr. Donna Hughes