There are times when words are nearly meaningless, when the only thing that matters is embodied action. There are times when words are all we have. As we write to this you, months into the Global Pandemic, having just passed 100,000 deaths in the US and 350,000 worldwide, we have nothing left to say and yet the beautiful, hopeful and resilient words of feminism are all we have.

As we write this to you, there is a rebellion against police brutality against Black people and systemic racism happening around the US and the world. Words are not enough. We must put our bodies on the line too. But words create the possibilities of mourning and change. “Say their names” “I can’t breathe” “Black Lives Matter.”

We had planned for our annual Gensler Family Symposium to explore “Feminist World Making at the End of the World,” but we never got to hear about the tools and theories and activisms that could help us face this moment and also help us imagine how we can build the world anew. Instead, we have had to come up with our own words, our own images, and our own ideas for feminist world-making.

That’s why the Program in Gender, Sexuality & Feminist Studies and the Feminist Resource Center at Chellis House began the Feverish Feminisms project. When all systems failed, we turned to social media to get the words out, to consider how feminism could respond to this crisis. A more feminist, more socially just, more sustainable future is not only possible, but mandatory. We will not survive this pandemic or whatever comes after if we cannot all figure out how to put people and community first. We hope you will join us in posting, creating poetry for, and generally helping keep us all focused on feminist world-making.

We also hope you enjoy this newsletter as it considers our recent feminist past and all that we were able to achieve. The way the pandemic has stopped the work we were doing is devastating—no in person classes, no graduation reception where we got to hug our graduates and wish them well, no research trips, no feminist events in Chellis. We want to acknowledge all that we have lost. But we also want to remind you that we are in this together. If you have an idea to share, an internship to post, or just want to be reminded that we will get through this, do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Karin Hanta
Director of Chellis House

Laurie Essig
Director of the Program in Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies

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During the 2020 J-term, Professor Carly Thomsen’s GSFS 203 “Performing Reproductive Politics” class staged a production of Paula Kamen’s *Jane: Abortion and the Underground* at Middlebury College. The goal of the intensive four week course was two-fold: to learn about how Feminist and Queer Studies can be used in the service of abortion justice and also to stage a production that would allow students to move their conversations beyond the classroom. The idea originated with Taite Shomo ’20.5, a Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies and Art History joint major. After taking Dr. Thomsen’s Politics of Reproduction course in fall 2018 and feeling inspired by Annika Speer’s article “The Feminist Potential of Docudrama” about the political and epistemological possibilities of staging *Jane*, she asked Dr. Thomsen whether she could direct the play during J-term. The class was approved and almost three dozen students came to support Taite and Dr. Thomsen by working on set and costume design. The majority of the students neither had prior experience with theater nor had taken courses in Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies. The composition of the course was as one of its strengths, enabling interesting conversations and possibilities for collaboration.

The play tells the story of the Jane Collective, an underground abortion referral network operating out of Chicago. A bit of a historical background: Until *Roe v. Wade* was decided in 1973, abortion was illegal in the United States. Despite this, women had abortions—and at rates similar to today. Some self-aborted, while others terminated their pregnancies with help from licensed doctors or even non-professionals.
In 1969, Heather Booth, a University of Chicago student, founded the Jane Collective. This group consisted of Chicago housewives and students and started out as a referral service for women seeking abortions, but eventually grew into a network that provided counseling, abortion services, and in some cases, childcare to women of all races and socio-economic statuses.

Women found out about the collective by word of mouth or advertisements in newspapers that read “Need Help? Call Jane.” In 1971, members of the collective learned that one of their doctors was not licensed, though he had been performing up to 20 abortions a day. Soon after, members of the collective taught themselves to perform abortions, which cut costs from up to $1000—equivalent to $6,500 today—to approximately $100. Performing the abortions themselves allowed the Jane Collective to better control costs and offer abortions on a sliding scale. Throughout the four years of its operation, the group performed around 11,000 abortions—entirely without fatalities. In 1972, police arrested seven Jane members after raiding the apartment where they operated. However, before the case went to trial, the 1973 Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision legalized abortion and all charges were dropped.

The story of Jane continues to offer many lessons for thinking about abortion politics, reproductive justice, and women’s liberation—and these lessons are shared in Paula Kamen’s play Jane: Abortion and the Underground.

As part of their coursework, students produced a website that provides a historical background of the abortion movement and the play: (www.teachingthejanecollective.com). Readers will also find all the academic and journalistic articles that the class discussed to prepare for the production. The play is also on youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EigEXNSX-xo&fbclid=IwAR2Sc1Napl97Y6eVbHxfb6LEiVPn8oj_. The website also points to current obstacles that the reproductive justice movement faces, a particularly salient point as access to abortion is severely curtailed during the Covid-19-crisis.

“While learning about the importance of affective bonds in feminist activism, we were also able to build and strengthen our own mutual bonds of affection and thus expand our academic and activist horizons,” says Elissa Asch ’23.5, who acted in the play.

For editing the script, holding auditions, casting, and directing (without any previous directing experience) and her incredible ability to create a community of people, Taite Shomo garnered the 2020 SGA Award for Extraordinary Initiative.
WIKIPEDIA EDIT-A-THON FOR INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY

Every year, the activist group Art + Feminism stages a campaign to add feminist knowledge to Wikipedia. This year, students in Hemangini Gupta’s class “Feminist Foundations” added new Wikipedia pages or edited existing ones to critically intervene in how questions of gender and sexuality are represented on the Internet. One group who added a page highlighting the research of Mexican–American historian Cynthia E. Orozco are now in contact with her—she had always wanted her own Wiki page and is delighted to find herself represented in one! Another student highlighting the work of Ieshia L. Evans, now well-known in the iconic photograph in which she stands up to state troopers in a protest against the killing of Alton Sterling, found her Wiki entry rejected. The comment stated that there was not enough evidence to warrant Evans deserved her own Wiki page. A student group amended the entry of a well-known donor to Middlebury College, adding the often-concealed allegations of his involvement in sexual harassment. Yet another translated from a Japanese legal document, inserting feminist concerns into the Japanese wiki page.

Students created their Wikipedia interventions with the able assistance of Middlebury College’s Associate Provost for Digital Learning, Amy Collier. Through the session, they grappled with what it means to write "objectively," reflected on what kinds of knowledge are deemed worthy of a Wiki entry, and immersed themselves in translation—between Spanish and English, Japanese and English, but also between feminist and queer theory and a platform that demanded apolitical “facts.”

ART + FEMINISM

FEMINIST PEDAGOGY WORKSHOP DURING J-TERM

Thanks to funds provided by Art Gensler, GSFS professors Hemangini Gupta and Carly Thomsen co-organized and facilitated a J-term seminar on contemporary feminist and queer theory for eight faculty colleagues primarily located outside of Gender Studies. Following Sara Ahmed’s formulation of “use,” the seminar centered on the question of the “use” of feminist and queer theory beyond Feminist or Queer Studies. By reading a variety of articles, participants from Religion, Anthropology, Luso-Hispanic Studies, Black Studies, Creative Writing, English and American Literatures, and Linguistics reflected on how these readings and related conversations are informing their thinking and teaching more broadly. One participant, for example, noted that Mel Chen's work on agitation, which we read in our seminar, has transformed her work on zombies. In choosing the readings, Professors Gupta and Thomsen archived and analyzed all special issues of Feminist and Queer Studies journals published in the last few years, noting themes that cut across the issues. They ultimately decided to frame the seminar around four themes: affect, feminist and queer geographies, science and technology studies, and the question of method. In a moment in which Feminist and Queer Studies scholars are reflecting on questions of “use” and the lessons we can gain from critically reflecting on our objects and the affects attached to them, seminar participants are crafting short essays reflecting on how these conversations are “useful” more broadly. Gupta and Thomsen are in the process of threading these essays together into one collective article, which we hope will be published in a Feminist Studies journal.
On March 3 and 4, 2020, L.A. Theatre Works presented a performance of *SEVEN* at Wright Memorial Theatre. The production of this play was initiated by Liza Sacheli, Director of the Mahaney Center for the Arts. The play was commissioned by Vital Voices, an organization that invests in women leaders who are solving the world’s greatest challenges. In 2006, Vital Voices connected seven female playwrights (Carol K. Mack, Anna Deavere Smith, Paula Cizmar, Catherine Filloux, Gail Kriegel, Ruth Margraff, and Susan Yankowitz) with seven extraordinary female-identified leaders to tell their life stories. The production consisted of a minimalist set with only seven microphones spaced over two risers. The show opens with seven women walking to their respective microphone, inviting the audience into the lives of their characters through intimate stories. These stories relate confrontations with violence and oppression, while simultaneously channeling the love and compassion each woman found within herself to work for others.

Each story includes a moment when the protagonists are confronted with social expectations enforced by patriarchal systems but find themselves in a unique position to fight for justice. *SEVEN* expertly weaves anecdotes from each character together into a single tapestry.

The first character to introduce herself is Inez McCormack—played by Ellis Greer—from Northern Ireland. Greer, playing McCormack, opened the show with a bouncing Irish accent and began telling the audience about her sheltered Protestant upbringing in the midst of a stark political and religious divide. She came to marry a Catholic and started attending protests eventually attacked by loyalists. Inez McCormack went on to become the first full-time female official of the National Union of Public Employees and the first female President of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

Next, we meet Farida Azizi, played by Laila Ayad, who was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, but had to flee to a refugee camp in Pakistan after the Soviet invasion. As a young woman, Azizi sought out opportunities to help others in similar situations. Unlike male healthcare workers, Azizi was permitted into Taliban-controlled Afghanistan to provide medical treatment for women. As a result, she came to support women’s medical and educational programs in the country, which she does to this day.

From Russia, we meet Marina Pisklakova-Parker, played by Shannon Holt. Almost immediately after appearing on stage, Holt as Pisklakova-Parker picks up a ringing telephone, the only prop on stage, and begins comforting a distressed woman who has
been beaten by her husband. Pisklakova-Parker explains how she began supporting women who were experiencing violence at the hands of their husbands. At the time, Russia lacked a vocabulary for domestic violence because it was deemed a private matter. When answering the phone, Holt perfectly articulates the struggle to discuss a topic such as domestic violence within the cultural and linguistic bounds of Russian. Confronting this matter head-on, Marina Piskalkova-Parker founded the first hotline to help victims of domestic violence in Russia in 1993 which has grown into a coalition of crisis centers called Center ANNA.

Mu Shochua, played by Tess Lina, works with survivors of sex trafficking in Cambodia and Thailand. Lina as Shochua spoke with great compassion about the women she helps. The Middlebury auditorium was transformed as she began to speak about her work, the violence women face in sex trafficking and the barriers they encounter when they escape.

Next, we meet Anabella De Leon, played by Maritxell Carrero, who wears a smart business suit and stands with her arms crossed and shoulders back. Carrero’s portrayal of De Leon perfectly embodies the “strictly-business” success of this human rights lawyer. Switching in and out of Spanish, Carrero tells stories of De Leon’s Guatemalan upbringing and how—against village norms—she finished her education and received a law degree. Growing up in poverty furnished De Leon with a passion to fight for human rights. Using the privilege of her law degree and newly found socioeconomic status, De Leon personally navigated legal labyrinths to advocate for those without her skills and to put those abusing power in their place.

We travel from Guatemala to the U.S. to meet Hafsat Abiola, played by Sarah Hollis. Hollis as Abiola describes a moment in her student days at Harvard when she encounters a protest against the wrongful imprisonment of Nigerian president-elect, Moshood Abiola. When organizers of the protest approach her asking for her support, she informs them that Moshood Abiola is her father. Hollis as Abiola explains how this event sparked her lifelong activism fighting for human and civil rights around the globe. She shares stories about the founding of the Kudirat Initiative for Democracy, which provides skill-training and leadership opportunities for young women throughout Nigeria.

And finally, SEVEN tells the story of Mukhtar Mai, played by Lovlee Carroll, a young woman from Pakistan who was used as a pawn in an honor revenge gang rape. Carroll as Mai breathes devastation and determination into this story of triumph as she chronicles Mai’s life or death fight against normative gender roles and expectations. In the end, Mai received justice against her attackers. She continues to work tirelessly for the education of women in her country.

SEVEN presents an unmatched method of storytelling that did justice to the life experiences and achievements of these seven women. As an added bonus, two of the actors visited Cheryl Faraone’s “Contemporary Women Playwrights” class to talk about their creative process.
On February 22nd, Las Nietas de Nonó visited Middlebury College and utilized a live performance installation in Coltrane Lounge to bring awareness to systemic issues in Puerto Rico that are often rendered invisible due to the territory’s detachment from the coastal United States.

As students entered the performance space, sisters Lydela and Michel de Nonó continued cooking food and listening to music; the space immediately felt intimate. The event began with the breaking of bread and the serving of jamaica and yuca to audience members. The incorporation of food was an integral part of the sisters’ performance as it fostered a warm and inviting environment. Members of the audience were encouraged to partake in the distribution and cooking of the food which added to the warm ambiance. In creating this welcoming climate, the sisters were able to discuss difficult issues in an inclusive way.

Puerto Rico’s relationship with food is political because insecure food supplies and lack of access to food sources impact the daily lives of Puerto Ricans year round. Therefore, the presence of food as a central character in the performance transcended a simple fostering of community and served as a reminder of how public access to food can drive change and bring people together.

As the performance transitioned, Michel continued cooking and Lydela began walking around the space with a plant. Michel requested...
that the audience “hagan espacio para la planta” (or, in English, make room for the plant) and proceeded to walk around the room, forcing audience members to continuously move their chairs and belongings to make space for the plant. This interruption of the audience’s space served as a possible metaphor for how environmental injustice can displace people from the communities in which they feel comfortable. Using a different lens to analyze this scene, the prioritization of the plant may have also called for the recognition of how humans need to disrupt their daily lives to fight for climate justice that will inherently protect the future of all species on earth.

As if foreshadowing the Corona crisis, Lydela transitioned from walking around the room with the plant to travelling with a mask in her raised hands. The wearing of the coconut and maracas mask represented a call to their Afro-Puerto Rican ancestors. As they acknowledge the influence of previous generations of activists, establishing a connection with the ancestors forms an integral part of their work. Understanding this history centers Las Nietas’ art in a historical moment that has been created by prior years of community building.

At the end of their performance, Las Nietas de Nonó presented a brief clip of one of their shows, in which they focus on storytelling to bring awareness to injustices that people have faced in Puerto Rico—forced sterilization, food insecurity, and the prison industrial complex—all at the hands of the U.S. government. After showcasing a part of their work, they explained how difficult it was for them to break into the live performance business. They did not have access to the funding needed to provide props, actors, lighting, advertising, and the physical space where they put on the show. To work around this struggle, Las Nietas de Nonó presented their first shows in their families’ living rooms and eventually expanded into the public sphere. The sisters have labored to create their art together and are continuing to bring awareness and call people to action to address the issues impacting the people of Puerto Rico.
On March 2, 2020, Dr. Kimberly Morgan, a professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, gave a talk titled “Gender and the Mainstreaming of Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe.” Dr. Morgan described how countries in this region have consistently achieved high scores for promoting gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, according to the World Economic Forum. The popularity of these socially progressive ideas has shifted the surface appearance of right-wing populism in Western Europe, turning it into a more “feminine” movement. Politicians such as Alice Weidel of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Marine Le Pen of the National Rally party exemplify the feminization of right-wing populism. Dr. Morgan argued that this feminization was not orchestrated to attract feminist or LGBTQ+ voters, but rather constitutes an attempt to mainstream former fringe parties and their anti-immigration and Islamophobic ideology.

After presenting her thesis, Dr. Morgan outlined the historical background of Western European politics and social movements from 1945 to 1975, which Dr. Morgan called the “golden age of the welfare state.” During this time, male breadwinners abounded and religious observance was strict. Trade unions were strong and only few women were found in the workplace, which perpetuated traditional gender roles. As anti-LGBTQ+ laws were in force until the 1990s, a concomitant representation was absent from politics.

However, the 1970s brought about social change—a decline in religious practice, an increase in women’s employment, and, aided by quota laws, in female parliamentary representation. The radical populist right emerged in the 1980s and got its start by appealing to people’s sense of national identity. To this day, the parties welcome voters who remain conservative on issues of women’s and LGBTQ+ rights and immigration. Dr. Morgan referenced Jean-Marie Le Pen, the former leader of French National Front, who represents a far-right, Catholic milieu and who compares abortion to genocide. The populist right is a platform predominately supported by men and those with the least progressive views on women and LGBTQ+ issues. Over the last few years, this population is actually declining, however, and the conservative supporter base for the populist right is becoming less conservative.

In response to this social shift, the far-right has strategically mainstreamed its political trajectory to gain leverage without fundamentally changing its base. The party signals its social acceptability by operating within the bounds of a national normative consensus and defending femininity, not feminism, to attack issues of immigration.

One case study presented by Dr. Morgan
focused on the gendered attacks on Muslim immigrants in France in the 2000s. Previously, the government acted indifferently toward minority women, but the headscarf became a symbol of fundamentalism and the melding of church and state. Throughout Western Europe, right-wing populist parties have insisted that a ban on headscarves would actually protect Muslim women from barbaric husbands and misogynistic fathers who use Islam as an excuse to oppress women. By painting Islamophobia as gender equality for their political gain, right-wing populist parties pursue the same xenophobic goals, albeit with new, more socially acceptable motivations and tactics.

Dr. Morgan summarized that these parties only discuss women’s and LGBTQ+ rights in the context of debates over immigration, as demonstrated in France. The tactics of right-wing populists to nominate women as party leaders exemplifies the utilization of femininity for political appeal as a signal of acceptable social progress. This reframing of generally traditional conservative views has increased the popularity of right-wing populism in Western Europe.
On Thursday March 5, 2020, Emily Bernard, Julian Lindsay Green and Gold Professor of English at the University of Vermont, visited Middlebury to deliver the inaugural lecture for the launch of the Axinn Center for the Humanities. Little did we know that our community and our lives were about to change so drastically within a few days. But her visit has left its mark: students, faculty, and staff have remarked how powerful her lecture was and how much they have cherished interacting with Professor Bernard—over the Womxn of Color lunch at Chellis House and in a writing workshop.

At lunch, Emily Bernard gathered with members of Womxn of Color to discuss what it feels to be a womxn of color living in Vermont and the wider U.S. Professor Bernard stressed the importance of spaces such as Chellis House where people get a sense of “being held.” One of the topics that came up in the course of the discussion was the issue of “undatability” that many WOC perceive to exist on this campus. Professor Bernard was able to reach students on a very personal level, quickly establishing an atmosphere of safety and trust in which they could share their own experiences.

In her richly nuanced lecture, Professor Bernard reminded us of the centrality of storytelling and memory/remembrance, of place and identity, topics she addressed in her book *Black is the Body: Stories from My Grandmother’s Time, My Mother’s Time, and Mine* (winner of the 2019 Christopher Isherwood Prize of the Los Angeles Times).

Echoing Kevin Quashi’s ideas that Blackness is “full range of inner life,” Professor Bernard homed in on the fact that even though Blackness is often equated with public life and expressive culture, it is just as much a private experience, a spiritual identity, and an ethical practice. In her own life, she grew up under banner of the cliché that “the personal is political,” a credo which has become her politics. This “full range of inner life” often gets overshadowed by ubiquitous images of brutality committed against Black people, which in fact dehumanize them on account of their ubiquity.

Emily Bernard’s full range of inner life includes many “tender contracts of conversations” with people of all races. While adverse to the notion that people of color need to educate white people about racism, Professor Bernard believes that friendships have the potential to inspire those of us who believe in them, serving as a “portal onto the possibility of change.” While racism is systemic and institutional, it is people who invent systems and create and inhabit institutions. The gift of the humanities is that they provide education, Professor Bernard said. When we learn, we are liberated from our ignorance. Education means freedom and—hopefully—forgiveness.

“It is a bold and wild and bottomless challenge to open ourselves up to learning,” Emily Bernard said. “[This challenge entails] growth, pain and even love, when it feels like the world is crumbling. But growth, pain, and love—these are the occasions to which the humanities enable us to rise.”

Just as this newsletter is going to press, we found out that Emily Bernard won an Andrew Carnegie Fellowship for her proposal “Unfinished Women,” a collection of eight narrative nonfiction essays about Black women artists and public figures. Her words resonate now as we search for ways to articulate and commemorate our experiences during this crisis. To watch her talk again, please follow the vimeo link at: http://www.middlebury.edu/academics/humanities/events-and-speakers
On Tuesday, March 10, 2020, Middlebury announced that it would be shutting down for the foreseeable future. Students were requested to leave by the following Friday. Before the administration released details about financial aid, transportation, packing materials, or a clear sense of who qualified to remain on campus, the Middlebury College Mutual Aid spreadsheet was created. The spreadsheet was immediately circulated through Facebook and Instagram posts, through various activist chats and student organization email lists, and through conversations between students, faculty, staff, and community members in those panicked hours and days. At a time when the College was not yet providing information about student belongings, numerous offers for storage and moving help popped up. While there was still no “break bus” schedule, there were offers for rides to Burlington or Port Henry, or longer carpools to Connecticut, Maine, and Maryland. There were even offers to join road trips to states that are days away like Colorado, Georgia, and Illinois with drivers who were willing to stop anywhere vaguely on the way. Alumni, students, and community members offered beds and couches temporarily and long term all over the country. Offers came in from Middlebury and the surrounding towns, Boston, Chicago, Nashville, New York, Denver, and more. Separate tabs were created for emotional help, food, health care support, storage, transport, housing, childcare, internet spaces, plant and pet care. I remember regularly refreshing the page, not searching for anything in particular but the constant warmth I felt whenever I saw a new listing posted: when I saw an alumni friend offering her apartment couch in Minneapolis, when I noticed my professor giving an open invitation for a home-cooked meal, and so many other familiar and not so familiar names willing to give whatever as long as there was someone in need.

Writing this on April 19, over a month later, I see that the most recent edit was 5 days ago. Even though most students have left, this community remains intact. Perhaps this is so remarkable because everyone is physically isolated, or because in time of such dire need there is clearly so much generosity, or maybe because Middlebury never felt so united especially in the months leading up to the outbreak of Covid-19. We entered this period fairly distraught as a campus. This was the lead-up
Febe Armanios (History) was awarded the Luce/ACLS Fellowship in Religion, Journalism, and International Affairs for her 2020-21 sabbatical. Her book project, *Satellite Ministries: The Rise of Christian Television in the Middle East*, explores the rise, expansion, and influence of Christian television in the Middle East, from the early 1980s to the present. Christian broadcasting was initially established by American televangelists who sought to spread their charismatic brand of Christianity. The development of American-sponsored channels, however, challenged Middle Eastern Christians to defend their own voices and pioneer their own religious channels, which captured a local perspective on spirituality, theology, culture, and politics.

Hemangini Gupta (GSFS) published an article titled “testing the future: gender and technocapitalism in start-up India” in *Feminist Review* (vol. 123, 2019). She also produced a video essay, “phallic distributions,” which was streamed at the conference of the Society for Cultural Anthropology in early May.

Lana Povitz (History) will be a fellow at the University of Pennsylvania’s Katz Centre for Advanced Judaic Studies in fall 2020. She will be working on her second book project, *Sisters of Fire: a collective historical biography of radical feminist Shulamith Firestone, psychotherapist Laya Firestone Seghi, and Rabbi Dr. Tirzah Firestone*. She will then be returning to Middlebury as a visiting assistant professor, beginning in Spring 2021.

For the 2019/2020 school year, Carly Thomsen (GSFS) received a $33,000 grant from the Fund for Innovation for the Games Project, a pedagogical approach through which students convert (or “translate”) complicated academic arguments and ideas into playable board games. Her documentary *In Plain Sight* (https://www.inplainsightdocumentary.com/) was screened at St. Cloud State University and at Middlebury. Together with Grace Tacherra Morrison, Carly also published an article entitled “Abortion as Gender Transgression: Reproductive Justice, Queer Theory, and Anti–Crisis Pregnancy Center Activism” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Vol. 45, No. 3, Spring 2020).
Cheryl Faraone Directs Her Last Show

After a very successful 34-year “run” at Middlebury, Professor Cheryl Faraone directed her last Middlebury production, William Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar with an all-female and non-binary cast. In this interview, she reflects on her involvement with Women’s (and Gender) Studies and Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies and her most recent show (presented on Zoom in early May).

By Karin Hanta

KH: Cheryl, you have been involved with our program for a very long time. Please take us back to how it all started.

CF: Richard Romagnoli and I started teaching in the Theatre Department in the fall of 1986; I was asked to design a winter term class— I created a course called “Contemporary Women Playwrights,” for January 1987, which subsequently moved to the regular curriculum and has been taught consistently since. I was very interested and involved in the program—which Peggy Nelson and Diana Henderson built—from the very beginning.

KH: Which other courses have you offered in the program?

CF: I taught “Feminist Foundations,” “Feminist Theory” and I also directed the program. I also taught a number of first-year seminars. One of them was titled “Significant Others” and focused on women artists who were married to male artists, but were overshadowed by them, such as Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock. At the time, cultural history was beginning the reclamation process. I also taught a winter term class on Sylvia Plath and Sarah Kane whose work intertwines in many ways. Sarah Kane was an extraordinary playwright who killed herself at the age of 29.

KH: How have you seen the program change over the years?

CF: It’s completely changed because our views of gender have altered and become much more expansive. I remember using Kate Bornstein’s The Gender Workbook. At the time, it was a very intelligent, yet accessible book. With seriously playful quizzes, readers could question where they lay on the what Bornstein called the “gender continuum.” It was then considered radical, but may now come across as antiquated, even though it was a really important rung on the ladder. At that time the sense of gender was very heteronormative even if this heteronormativity did not necessarily mean cisgender. There were very limited categories, yet strict definitions. I am not even sure whether the term “queer” had been repurposed then.

KH: How have you brought your feminist focus to your plays?

CF: For this production, I chose to direct Julius Caesar because of its focus on power and ideology and Alex Draper had chosen Art by Yasmina Reza, which is written for three men. There was thus a big “gender gap” that made me initially consider gender blind casting. I got increasingly not interested in foregrounding gender because then the story is only told through that lens. Julius Caesar is a play about power. The moment you start talking about power and gender, you...
either have to meet or subvert everybody’s expectations because audience members look at the play through their experiences. I was getting more and more uneasy about this idea and started to only call back female-identified and non-binary actors. When they came back to read for the parts, it all became very simple. The idea of gender disappears when it is not the question on the table. It becomes more about how does the energy inherent in the role connect with a certain actor. We ignored the fact that the two ‘traditionally’ gendered relationships weren’t embodied as you would expect them to be. For Shakespeare, there is more than a fair bit of misogyny in the play—all the stereotypes about women being weaker, more fearful, powerless. I didn’t get rid of all of it, but some. I didn’t want the audience’s ears and minds to get caught on these stereotypes and be distracted from what we were doing with the play. I never once felt anything but really, really happy with this casting choice.

KH: How did you and your cast experience the switch to a zoom format?  
CF: Even though the students entered this process cautiously, they became really familiar with zoom. Let’s face it: it’s nobody’s favorite mode of communication. At first, the cast didn’t see how our expansive play was going to translate into this format. I didn’t either. I don’t think I had even been on zoom before. But once you spend time on it, it becomes clear it can be a really good communicative model, even on screen. Over four weeks of rehearsals, the actors became much more familiar with the play. They were able to be incredibly sensitive in their scenes and connections with each other, possibly more so than they would have been on stage because they would have been far more—(ha, ha, ha)—socially distant for the most part and would have been far more conscious of having to reach out to an audience. They knew there was an audience, but the audience made no sound. For the kind of production it was, it turned out to be great. I would not want to work like that for the rest of my life, but you learn a lot. The cast really got to understand the power of language in theatre experientially. We are not a linguistically sophisticated country. When you first get experienced in theatre, you focus on all the other elements—the personal, visual, the physical. In the zoom format, you didn’t have much else other than language. If you weren’t really paying attention to the nuances and the poetry of the text, what were you giving us?

KH: Was this your first experience with an all-female-identified and non-binary cast?  
CF: No, it was not. Two years ago, I directed *Men on Boats* by Jaclyn Backhaus, which centered on the first officially sanctioned voyage down the Colorado River in the 19th century. The characters are all male but intended to be played by women. I also directed Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*, written for all women. Working in this way changes the dynamic in the room enormously. Something about communication and trust happens more quickly.

KH: What’s in the cards for you after your retirement in May 2021?  
CF: I am on leave for a year now, but I’ve taught my last class. It was an interesting ending as my last production as a faculty member. We have one more season of Potomac Theatre Project in New York in 2021. I would also like to write a book on the position of the university as laboratory and crucible for the performing arts.

KH: Thank you for the interview and your hard work for Women’s (and Gender) Studies and GSFS!
When the Feminist of the Year Award was established 30 years ago, nobody would have been able to imagine how we would celebrate in 2020. Known for its inspiring laudatory remarks, warm embraces, artistic contributions, and loads of chocolate covered strawberries, the celebration seemed like straight out of an episode of The Jetsons this year. The virtual setting did not diminish the good mood, however. Celebrants smiled at each other across their computer screens and eagerly joined a virtual dance party. The celebration started with Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive,” our rally song for the foreseeable future. We first honored the faculty Feminists of the year. This year, the jury decided to distinguish two professors: Hemangini Gupta and Amy Morsman. Just within a short time, Professor Hemangini Gupta has become a huge presence in the GSFS program, one of her nominators note. Her courses are incredibly engaged with the major issues of Feminist Studies, but at the same time they reach out and connect to other fields such as Labor Studies and Science and Technology Studies and thereby bring in a wider group of students. In her free time, Professor Gupta is always ready to lend a hand to make feminism happen at Middlebury, whether it is organizing the pedagogy workshop for faculty
during J-term, meeting with students over dinner to discuss various issues on campus, or volunteering to facilitate a feminist reading group in Womxn of Color.

The second winner, Professor Amy Morsman, has taught cross-listed History and GSFS classes for close to two decades and has been nominated throughout the years for inspiring students in her “Women in American History” class. In 2015, Professor Morsman provided the scholarly foundations for the “Click! The Ongoing Feminist Revolution” online project developed by the Vermont-based “Clio Visualizing History” organization. “Click” highlights the achievements of women from the 1940s to the present and explores the complexity of gender consciousness in modern American life. In 2017, Richard Saunders, director of the Middlebury Museum, asked Professor Morsman whether she was interested in designing an exhibition on the centennial on U.S. women’s suffrage. She followed suit and structured her following first-year seminar around this theme. The outcome was an amazing exhibition that opened in early September 2019 and can now be viewed online. The exhibit highlighted the challenges inherent in the suffrage movement—the racism and classism. Amy had designed and mounted the exhibit during her free time in the summer and continued to graciously donate her time in public lectures throughout Vermont, and—particularly heart-warming—for the middle school members of the Sister-to-Sister group.

Jason Vrooman, director of engagement and curator at the Middlebury Museum of Art, was nominated in the staff category. A 2003 graduate of Middlebury College and PhD in art history from New York University, Jason immediately connected with the Feminist Resource Center at Chellis House upon his return to Middlebury to see how we could collaborate. We have since collaborated on activities for World AIDS Day. Last December, for example, we had a panel of AIDS activists at the museum and then Jason brought out an original artwork by Keith Haring and gave a presentation. The day culminated in a screening of videos in the series “A Day Without Art.” Over the past 1.5 years, Jason has also shown his support by joining the Chellis House Advisory Board and initiated a few improvements, such as the redesign of the Feminist of the Year nomination website. Dr. Vrooman also was instrumental in facilitating museum presentations for younger audiences. In particular, he made his museum docents available to welcoming the Sister-to-Sister group to the "Votes...for Women?” exhibition.

in December. He has been an invaluable resource to faculty in the classroom, where he has come to talk about feminist art such as Guerrilla Girls agitprop.

The jury decided to award the prize to six students this year. Elissa Asch ’22.5 is a director of the SGA Sexual & Relationship Respect Committee. As part of her work with SRR, she has organized Sex in the Dark events aimed at answering students’ questions about sex and relationships, and in the time of covid—during sexual assault awareness month—she put together multiple comprehensive resource guides for the student body. In these guides she provides many resources related to self-care, support for survivors of sexual assault, support for those suffering from domestic abuse, positive sex ed, and much more. When on campus, Elissa continually promotes sexual health and healthy relationships in her daily interactions with her peers. Most remarkably, she has achieved what other students and staff couldn’t do in previous years: she has pushed for anchoring consent
workshops as an integral part of orientation and has succeeded!

Annie Blalock ’20.5, has been indefatigable as FAM leader for the past three years. Initially attracted by the group’s affiliation with Planned Parenthood, she cast FAM’s focus more widely, organizing activism outside of the Middlebury bubble and providing space for our community to respond to national events. FAM members and their allies called government representatives about DACA, gun regulations, and fair housing legislation, wrote to the Department of Justice about proposed changes to Title IX, and tabled for Planned Parenthood’s #Fight4BirthControl campaign. Most recently, Annie and her team went to Town Meeting Day to educate Middlebury residents about Proposition 5, a proposed amendment to the Vermont constitution that would anchor the right to personal reproductive autonomy in the constitution. As a lasting legacy to Middlebury, Annie and her team created Go/SexySources, a website to provide Middlebury students of all identities a comprehensive guide to sexual and reproductive health care on and around campus.

Mikayla Hyman ’20, a human being with limitless energy, developed a particular passion for Feminist Science Studies during her four years at Middlebury. She led science projects at Sister-to-Sister events; went into elementary and middle schools to teach female-identified students about science through the STEAM Girls Vermont Program; organized and curated the first Feminist Science Art Show in BiHall, and together with Mika Morton ’19, designed a curriculum to teach a winter term workshop on how to incorporate feminist perspectives into science classes at Middlebury College. She also she logged an astounding 600 hours of volunteer time as an advocate for WomenSafe and 275 hours at the Addison County Teen Center.

Even in his first year as a first-year senator and member of the SGA Relationship and Respect Committee, Christian Kummer ’22 showcased a passion for working through student government to make Middlebury a more inclusive, equitable, and compassionate space. He also served on the Institutional Diversity, the Health & Wellness, and the First Year Committees, advocating for the hiring of an assistant director of the AFC and the new Title IX coordinator. Besides working on feminist programming at Chellis House, Christian has also been involved in a variety of student organizations: he is a sex-positive peer educator in SPECs, he serves on the Community Judicial Board, he has been responsible for Q&A’s social media outreach, and he is a member of the Provost’s Student Advisory Committee. What is most congenial about Christian, however, is that he cares deeply of amplifying other people’s voices. As the head coach of Oratory Now, Christian has taught public speaking skills to dozens of people. It was very endearing to see him teach class of rather shy middle school girls at the Sister-to-Sister summit in November. By the end of the 45-minute session, he had gently led them towards giving a confident, powerful mini-speech. He has also served on the judicial board and now has been voted the Community Council co-chair.

As co-presidents of Womxn of Color, Ariana Rios ’21 and Izzy Rivera ’21 put a substantial amount of work this year into building community and keeping the club running. They have organized many different sustained initiatives, including Gal-ery, an art show featuring artwork, music and poetry by POC, particularly female-identified. They single-handedly put on a smashing Black Pearl Ball and hosted a lunch with visiting author Emily Bernard. They also changed the name of the organization, which made it even more inclusive group. Ariana and Izzi wanted to be a part of WOC’s organizing team because, as juniors, they wanted to foster community and create space for folks just as it had been done for them when they were in their first year.

Please congratulate all the winners if you have a chance!
This year the Gensler Senior Work Prize celebrates its thirtieth anniversary. Last year and this year, three of our excellent seniors—Erin Hoynes ’19, Nell Sather ’19, and Maria Bobbitt-Chertock ’19.5 garnered the award.

In 2019, the prize was split between two winners. Erin Hoynes won for her thesis, “Where Flower Stems Are Taller Than Trees’: Encounters with Subaltern Cartobiographies” and Nell Sather for her creative work, “Contra Dance, Queerness, and Rurality: (En)Countering Metronormativity in the Montpelier Grange.”

In 2020, Maria Bobbitt-Chertock ’19.5 won the prize for their thesis “Ghosts of the Trauma Murderess.” An abstract and excerpt from Maria’s exceptional thesis is shared on the next page.
Abstract for
“Ghosts of the Trauma Murderess,”
by Maria Bobbitt-Chertock ‘19.5

This project began as an analysis of women’s retributive violence in novels written by women. I looked at novels published since 1975 first to narrow the scope of available texts, and second because my research in literature thus far has focused on contemporary works of fiction. I then narrowed down my selection to novels that depict rape and retributive murder but do not define the protagonist’s gendered trauma by rape alone—that is, I selected novels that could potentially be misplaced within the rape-revenge genre but do not explicitly describe a causal relationship between the woman protagonist’s experience of rape and her violent behavior. As I began writing, I was forced to confront the limitations of a five-month research project, and so I again narrowed down my chosen texts to the following: Chase Berggrun’s R-E-D, Virginie Despentes’ Baise-Moi, Louise Erdrich’s Tracks, Natsuo Kirino’s Out, and Octavia Butler’s Kindred. I was not interested in studying one single representational approach to women’s violence, and these choices, I believe, build a kaleidoscope of perspectives and voices, both in terms of authorial positionality and in terms of narration and character.

I quickly realized I could not write this as a traditional analytical project. The only way to access these texts in a truthful manner was to situate them in the inspirational context, to allow myself room for personal narrative. So my research became concerned with chronic pain, madness, and trauma, and how these experiences are gendered, expressed, and lived through and beside. The woman who kills, in fictionalized form, has something to teach us about this.

Excerpt from Maria’s thesis:

Poet and Black Studies scholar Jackie Wang—who notably refers to herself as a “trauma monster” in every contributor bio of hers I have seen—explains this in an essay about rape culture:

“If the present is the privileged temporal position because it is the time of decision (the past has been decided, tomorrow will never arrive)—then what remains unexamined is the temporal wormhole called trauma, which can fix subjects to a moment in the past. To dwell in such a space is to inhabit the past as though it were the present. It is the meaning of being haunted. What kind of decisionism is possible here?”

Perhaps the actual passing present is more governable than the virtual preservation of the past—though, again, these categories cannot be theorized as mutually exclusive, and certain manifestations of the virtual [...] may be more governable than pain and grief. Virtuality is especially less governable when it incites a rude sort of stuck-ness, a resistance to the here-and-now, a refusal to let bygones be bygones. Those who slip out of the actual passing present haunt us.

The abused woman who strikes back—she is haunted, and she haunts us. The title of this project, “Ghosts of the Trauma Murderess,” should not indicate that I will be interpreting retributive violence as a manifestation of the desire to murder trauma. The “trauma murderess” is a nod to Jackie Wang’s “trauma monster”—the subjectivity that emerges from trauma.
My first contra dance made me dizzy. Dizzy from the constant spinning that characterizes the dance, and dizzy from the exuberant joy pulsating through the room. Dizzy as the rules of time, movement, and social grouping were thrown off-kilter while people of all ages and backgrounds twirled in unison for hours on end. The environment felt unique to any other I knew at the time. Starting that evening, contra dance quickly became my bi-weekly escape for the duration of my high school years in Montpelier, Vermont.

I went back to the Montpelier dance in the August before my senior year at Middlebury, however, and upon doing so found that I had a new lens with which to view the dance. The unique energy of the space suddenly seemed nameable, and the word that came to mind was queer.

On a simplistic level, my impulse to call the dance queer was based on my perception of the many visibly queer dancers present: countless people who look like men wearing skirts and people who look like women with buzzcuts, combined with the realization that all of my contra dance friends were gay. This was puzzling, because the Montpelier Contra Dance is not advertised as a queer affinity space-- and indeed, those who did not appear to be queer seemed straight in the extreme: elderly, white, presumably heterosexual couples dominated much of the room. What attracted these visibly queer people to a seemingly straight event, I wondered? My exposure to feminist and queer studies had provided me with tools and concepts to begin to answer this question, including conceptions of “queerness” that refer to something wider and more complex than a sexual identity alone. How might I understand the Montpelier contra dance as queer in ways that extend beyond the identity of participants? I have also been exposed to analyses of the ways that sexuality and gender are geographically informed. How does the rural setting of the event and contra dance’s historical ties to rurality impact the ways queerness is legible in this space? This project began out of a desire to be able to answer these questions, and in my efforts to do so, I have brought into conversation two central influencers of my embodied and intellectual experiences over the last nine years: contra dance and feminist studies.

Excerpt from Nell’s Senior Project:

When speaking to what draws LGBTQ people to contra dances, several interviewees brought up the element that might seem to be the dance’s most heteronormative element: the connection of dance roles to traditionally gendered language. Due to the gendered nature of the traditional dance roles, gender is linked to movement in contra dance. The differences between Gents and Ladies are choreographic [I capitalize Gent and Lady to highlight my use of the terms as dance roles, rather than as indicators of the dancers’ genders]; for example, in a spin, Ladies clasp hands with their partners using right hands and move in a backwards circular motion, while Gents use left hands to clasp hands and move forwards in the circle. Another figure that involves a significant variation between the roles is the ladies’ chain, in which the Ladies swap spots in the set by taking right hands and “pulling by” each other. While there was some disagreement among interviewees about whether these choreographic differences constitute leading and following [Social partner dances are considered to be lead and follow dances if one partner is controlling the majority of the movement], there was general agreement that there are affective differences between the experiences of dancing the two roles. Those who discussed the dance in terms of leading and following often equated leading with masculinity and attributed it to the Gent role, and equated following with femininity and the Lady role. For some, this binary and traditional articulation of gender roles actually provides opportunities to subvert gender expectations and experiment with gender fluidity, rather than simply reinscribing existing gender norms.
In the fall of 2018, I received an email from Professor Sujata Moorti asking if I would like to join three other students to participate as teaching assistants abroad for the month of January. I was told we would be working with a group of ninth grade girls from a country in Asia which has been the site of repeated military and colonial encroachments from the West. The school they all attend together, the first all-girls boarding school in their country, was founded by a Middlebury graduate upon her return home. Tasked with developing a curriculum that served as a primer for liberal arts education and critical thinking skills, we met as a group multiple times through November and December to plan and prepare lessons and activities. We knew generally that we wanted to formulate lesson plans targeted at developing media literacy and explaining foundational sociological concepts, which would be framed around course texts, writing assignments, and in-class discussions.

Along with this curriculum preparation, throughout the fall we all worked to personally prepare for the experience. As feminist studies students, we negotiated how our role as American teaching assistants might reproduce a Western fascination with saving third world women, a brand of “feminism” used to justify imperial projects. We reread texts by Saba Mahmood (2001), Chandra Mohanty (1988), and Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) to understand how complex geopolitical power dynamics are reworked at the interpersonal level in this transnational encounter, and to grapple with rewriting our own assumptions about the agency, or lack thereof, held by our future students. (...) During our last meeting together, the students presented the maps that they had worked on over the course of a week. I had caught glimpses here and there of their projects, but it was not until this class that I witnessed the final products they had created. Leaning against the wall at the side of the classroom, I was immediately blown away by the creative visuals, the complex narratives, and the historical embeddedness of their maps. (...) Inspired by Audre Lorde’s (1982) construction of a biomythography, I found that the insertion of selfhood into cartography accurately represented the way that these maps construct biographies of sorts. Rather than simply writing space, they write the self into space, which becomes discursively and visually symbolized in the sandwiching of the word.

Excerpt from Erin’s thesis:

“Aloonia” depicts a fictional world which serves as a representational projection of the heart of the student who created it. The map consists of a heart shaped island split in half, with a “dangerous jungle” separating the two sides, each of which contains a palace. Both sides contain mountains, signified by recognizable symbols, and are scattered with check marks and x’s that signify “safe” and “danger,” and stars which mean “beautiful.” Assorted symbols form a network across the page, creating a visual language of emotionality that contributes both to the plot of the fictional story this student is telling, and the affective landscape of the mapmaker who, in effect, is mapping the contours of her own heart.

This creation of unconventional symbology, alongside the production of spatiality through personal affect, stands both in contrast and in complement to the previously mentioned territorial maps. In the same way that cartographies of the state are steeped in and embodying affect to further a patriotic agenda, “Aloonia” similarly enacts a more personal spatial and emotional attachment. This different manifestation of affect expands our conception of what counts as cartographic identity formation, by revealing how tools of rendering both personal and political affect may be more similar than one would assume. It also reshapes our understanding to include a negotiation of not necessarily identities but of placements within and relationships to space. By expanding our idea of what is legitimate to map, this map destabilizes attachments to hegemonic cartography, and produces new tools for renegotiating the power of maps.
In 2019 and 2020, two students well known in Middlebury’s feminist community garnered the Alison G. Fraker Prize, which is awarded annually for the best semester project in the field of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies. In 2019, Taite Shomo ’20.5 wrote a romance novel set at Middlebury College for Professor Laurie Essig’s “Sociology of Heterosexuality” class. Taite wanted to examine heterosexuality, dating, and romance in a familiar context. She collected data from an anonymous survey on dating culture at Middlebury, which she combined with the romance novel “formula” that Janice Radway outlines in her book *Reading the Romance*. In doing so, she produced a narrative that reflected students’ experiences with love and dating on campus. In her novel, she chose to reverse the gender roles to draw attention to gendered nature of romance at Middlebury College as well as in the romance genre. In contrast to Radway’s dictum that romance novel heroes often exude “spectacular masculinity” as a foil to the heroine’s innocence and femininity, Taite reversed the gender roles. Not only is—the very amusing—*Tale of Two Biddies* told from the perspective of the male hero, but the hero also exhibits traditionally feminine characteristics and the heroine traditionally masculine characteristics. In doing this, Taite hoped that readers would see the hero in an emotionally vulnerable role and thus would consider the gendered expectations that are situated around romance, sex, and dating (see excerpt below).

2020 marks the 30th anniversary of the dedication of the Fraker Prize. Our late donor, Drue Gensler, established it in memory of Alison G. Fraker ’89, a much-beloved, vocally feminist student who was killed in a car accident a few weeks short of her graduation. It is only fitting—and a first in the prize’s history—that Grace Vedock ’20 won the award for two projects her professors had entered in the contest. In Laurie Essig’s “Gender & the Body” class, each student is encouraged to make one of their four papers a more creative project. For this assignment, Grace took Professor Essig’s alternative metaphor to intersectionality—the hairball—and decided to examine how race, gender, sex and other bodily markers cannot be separated from one another. She used feminist theorists Excerpt from Taite Shomo’s romance novel, *A Tale of Two Biddies*

“It’s getting so late,” she says, moving even closer. “We could just go back to my room. I doubt my roommate will be home tonight, especially if I ask her not to be.” My whole mood has changed. Has she only been looking to hook up with me this whole time? I look down at her smooth, expectant face. I thought she was different. I thought this was different.

I take a step back. “No.” Her face contorts, her smile quickly turning to a frown and her forehead wrinkling. “Excuse me?” “No,” I repeat. “I don’t want to go back to your room.” “Are you kidding me?” She looks genuinely shocked. She really thought she could just use me for sex, like the whole conversation we just had meant nothing to her but a way to lure me in. I feel sick.
and Supreme Court transcripts from cases concerning sex and gender to analyze how the Court’s understanding (or lack of thereof) of the complexities of gender and sex shapes its reasoning in cases that affect all of our lives. In particular, Grace looked at their insistence—regardless of where the justices are located politically—that sex is knowable, biological, and a simple binary. Grace then contrasted the justices’ statements with feminist understandings of the body (see excerpt).

Grace also won for her podcast titled “Militarized Masculinity: Examining ‘the Cult of Masculinity’ in Policing” for Professor Amit Prakash’s 2019 winter term course “Policing the Globe.” Based on interviews with preeminent masculinity scholar Michael Kimmel, she investigated the role of masculinity in police training in the contemporary United States. In the podcast, Grace reflected on the contradictory nature of masculinity encapsulated in the figures of “the good man” versus “the real man.” Whereas the “good man”—the helper in the police force—protects his community, the “real man”—the correctional officer—is always prone to violence. Militarized masculinity relies on social constructed ideas of maleness, to which male bonding, discipline, dominance, and a code of silence are integral. Here is a link to the podcast: http://policingtheglobe.middcreate.net/podcasts/.

Congratulations, Grace and Taite!
PAULA SCHWARTZ JOINS THE RESISTANCE AGAIN!

by Karin Hanta

After 31 years of service to Middlebury College, Paula Schwartz, Lois B. Watson Professor of French and Francophone Studies, is retiring. Her career path proves how research interest sustained since undergraduate times can lead to a life-long engagement with a subject matter—in Professor Schwartz’s case, the French Resistance. After saying goodbye to the classroom, she will devote her time to producing more scholarship from a wealth of personal archival materials and sources in Europe.

KH: How did you get interested in Women’s Studies at the onset of your career?

PS: I was already interested in Women’s Studies as an undergraduate. It shaped my coursework and research interests when I was a grad student at Columbia (MA in History) and New York University (PhD in French Studies). At Columbia I took “Western European Women’s History” with Marion Kaplan, but the history department refused to grant credit for it. That tells you something about the status of Women’s Studies in the early years.

KH: And how did you get involved in the program at Middlebury?

PS: Right after starting my teaching career at Middlebury in 1989, I began attending Women’s Studies meetings, which, at the time, were led by the founding members—Peggy Nelson, Diana Henderson, Cheryl Faraone, and Stan Bates. I started by teaching “Reading Women’s History” a couple of times in J-term. I also taught “Women and Fascism” and the junior methods seminar once or twice. Then as now, anyone could affiliate. Program affiliation did not depend on the ability to offer courses; not everyone could teach in the program because obligations to home departments came first.

KH: Did you also teach gender-focused classes in French?

PS: No, I didn’t, but it has always part of what I teach. I did direct gender-focused theses in French and in English.

KH: How have you seen the program change over the years?

PS: It has changed enormously! First of all, it has been legitimated and accepted by people at the College. It has increased its affiliated membership. It has also expanded the areas over which it has domain. It’s nothing like it was in the days when it was literally Women’s Studies and then Women and Gender Studies (WAGS). Course content is completely different, both more diverse and more theoretical. Also, the program was single-handedly funded from outside the College by a Middlebury alumna, Drue Gensler. Another difference is that many universities now have doctoral programs in Gender and Feminist Studies. At the time, these programs

When the French department was fully staffed, we could afford to offer the occasional course in English in interdisciplinary programs. I also directed the program on two occasions. People took turns on a rotational basis.
were just beginning to train a new generation of faculty. None of the founding members of the program had degrees in these areas. We had all come to Women and Gender studies through our own research and writing in our respective disciplines.

**KH: Did you have an agenda when you were director?**

**PS:** The agenda in the 1990s and early 2000s was to exist. The program desperately needed stability and designated faculty hired into the program who could offer courses on a regular basis. It was also getting harder and harder for people in other departments to direct this interdisciplinary program because of the demands placed on them by their home departments. People were really squeezed. But then we managed to hire Sujata Moorti as the first tenured professor in the program in 2005. The pressure eased somewhat, but as Sujata can testify, problems of legitimacy, staffing, and funding persisted.

**KH: Tell me how gender features in your research agenda.**

**PS:** It has been there ever since I started doing research. It started more with women, but as that territory became better known, it raised questions of women in relation to men. The picture became both broader and more nuanced. At the time, there were increasingly sophisticated inquiries into gender and it was a very exciting field in all domains, not only history. My first work on women in the French Resistance began as an independent study when I was an undergrad at Duke. I kept this focus throughout my graduate career, when I started to see women less in isolation, but as part of a gendered system. My recently published book, *Today Sardines Are Not For Sale: A Street Protest in Occupied Paris*, is about a demonstration that was billed as a women’s demonstration during and after World War II. In studying it, I discovered that it was a “women’s demonstration” in which men had played an active part. The role of the men had been eclipsed for various reasons. It was the perfect kind of subject for gender studies. The initial question was: why was the event characterized as a women’s demonstration when, in fact, it wasn’t one? Gendered roles and gendered memory are among the principal threads of the book.

**KH: What’s next for you research-wise? Are you going to join the resistance again?**

**PS:** Yes, I am! I have a lot of archival material and interviews from a large oral history project that I have not been able to exploit while teaching full time. In fact, I am retiring from teaching in order to focus on research and writing. I plan to spend a good deal of time in Europe. I can’t wait to return to the archives in Paris, but that will have to wait until the COVID pandemic is under control.

**KH: Which aspect of the resistance are you going to focus on?**

**PS:** The first thing I am going to tackle is a short book, part memoir, part biography, about Fanny Dutet, a French resister and friend who had a formative influence on me. The first section is already written and appeared in The New England Review [http://www.nereview.com/vol-36-no-3-2015/paula-schwartz/](http://www.nereview.com/vol-36-no-3-2015/paula-schwartz/). I am going to fill out the story by writing more about Fanny’s life in the underground and her resistance work in Auschwitz and Ravensbrück. I also plan to return to a study on communist and Jewish women, most of whom were Austrian refugees, whose political work consisted of infiltrating the German army that occupied France and Belgium during the Second World War.

**KH: That sounds exciting. Thank you very much for all your hard work for our program!**
May Belle Chellis Reaches Us Through the Ages

By Karin Hanta

In the midst of the coronavirus, I received an email from Jane Stephenson, President of the Plainfield Historical Society in New Hampshire. May Belle Chellis, the first woman to graduate from Middlebury in 1886, hailed from Meriden near Plainfield. Jane shared with me a letter her archivist Jane Fielder had discovered. May Belle—or “Belle” as she called herself at the time—had corresponded to her sister Abbie, an artist who after graduating with Belle from Kimball Union Academy, attended Cooper Union Institute, taught for a few years and then went to Paris in 1892 and 1893 to study art at Académie Delecluse, famous for encouraging women artists. May Belle went on to become Preceptress at both Black River Academy in Ludlow, Vermont and Gates Academy in Neligh, Nebraska, and Principal at St. Peter High School in Minnesota. She married Joseph Andrew Doremus in 1898 and raised five children.

It is fascinating to find out how little has changed—100°F below zero in a Vermont winter—and how much has: the social mores of the time, women wearing hoops, and the “sociable” in the church vestry. Belle seems to be quite discriminating in her choice of young men with whom she wishes to step out. Most remarkably, Belle is an ambitious student, who wants to be among the first 3 in algebra class. She saves up her money so she can see a performance by Shakespeare actor Edwin Boothe [history buffs among you will remember that Boothe was the brother of John Wilkes Boothe, who assassinated Abraham Lincoln.]

Middlebury historians have noted that May Belle Chellis’ presence and accomplishments forced the trustees to make accommodations—including a special curriculum, dedicated study and living space, and awards for scholarship—so that women could attend the College. “The faculty were not going to require us to do the regular work that the boys had;” Chellis reminisced in a later letter, “but [May Bolton, Class of 1887, Louise “Daisy” Edgerton, Class of 1887, and I] insisted that we ought to do it just the same.” Chellis captured the highest rank in Greek at the end of her freshman year, graduated Phi Beta Kappa, and delivered her essay “The Growth of Criticism” at the 1886 Commencement. In a time where travel is severely restricted, an unexpected trip to the past brings much joy!

May Belle Chellis Reaches Us Through the Ages

Middlebury, Vermont
December 16, 1883

Dear Abbie,

My last Sunday morning before I go home. I couldn’t sleep after 5 so built my fire & went back to bed [and] had to get up twice to fix it. I should have frozen solid if I hadn’t have built it for it is 100 below zero. It was eight yesterday morn. When we went down to prayers it was sharp, after this I went down to the depot to see about my journey home and got my ticket, Shall start at 3 1/2 Wednesday morning, wait at Essex Junction from 5 till 8 get to Leb[anon] about noon. Friday night played whist across the road till 12 1/2 and wasn’t a bit sleepy. We had coffee and cake but I couldn’t eat much, haven’t for the last few days. Homesick I guess! I have 5 examinations 2 Monday and 3 Tuesday. I studied all day yesterday on algebra. I got

A letter written from Middlebury College by May Belle Chellis, KUA 1879, to Abbie S. Chellis, KUA 1879

ABOVE: The letter-writer, May Belle Chellis ‘86, who was also Middlebury’s first female graduate.
terribly sick of it. I want to be among the first 3 of the class and must pass well in it if I do. Last Tuesday May and I took tea at Miss Callendars where Daisy boards. She is very pleasant. On some accounts I would like to board there it is nearer the Post Office & church etc But I should have to put on more style and pay more for my board. So I am very well contented shall be here next term. May is going to lend me her valise to take home so I shan’t take a trunk. Wednesday night we went to a sociable at the church vestry had a nice time. Had an escort home which of course increased the hilarity of the occasion, a Junior to Mr McLeod. And he asked me to go to Camilla Urso’s concert next Monday. Was introduced to him that evening for the first time. Of course I knew him before as I am in two of the Junior studies Chemistry and German. He is a great friend of Alice Twitchell’s the girl across the way and I don’t see why he didn’t ask her instead. Everybody here thinks I am dreadfully distant and don't smile enough to suit. So I am practicing grinning with a vengeance. Alice told me that somebody (no one in college, but she wouldn’t tell who) said I ought to have my axis [sic] greased so I could bow a little more intensely. You better believe I shall try to be a little gushing, I think it is the result of my last year. I didn’t know a soul in South Hadley outside the Seminary. And all summer I was among perfect strangers so I feel that there is some excuse for me. I am reviewing my youth here and shall soon will be as jolly as you please. Alice said I did better than usual Friday night. I heard there was to be a dancing school here this winter. I shall go if possible. Hope someone will ask me, that is someone nice, there are some here I wouldn’t go with. May Bolton is going to have a Freshman party the first of next term and have that little drama “The Register” in the December Harpers acted. I am the servant don’t have much to do. Get it and read it if you haven’t already. The silly part where they “make up” Daisy is going to skip “as it is too long”. A judicious cutting out of a line here and there will make it so much more agreeable. She and May had quite a time screwing up their courage to ask the boys to take part. Daisy knows how to dance and I danced a little with her in the library Fri. the Rachitte [sic] and polka. Kate taught me the R. and we had the polka step at South Hadley in gymnastics. “One” good result of my stay at any rate. Daisy and I didn’t go very well together but better than I would have thought. I think you ought to give me a gold medal for this long letter. Especially as I have put in “all the particulars” Shall you go to Rockford this winter? I am glad Uncle Erwin’s family are not in the woods up here this winter. Is Ella going to Mich. University? I have just had my breakfast. We don’t have to go down to prayers Sundays. I dread to stir out to church it is so cold but suppose we must go. I wish I had a fur coat. The caller who came to see Mrs Bolton last night had a lovely one. She is not at all well has dropsy consumption and I don’t know what else beside. She doesn’t stay in bed at all but can’t do anything. Edwin Boothe is coming to Rutland sometime this winter and I think I shall go and hear him instead of having a new bonnet. It will be pretty steep I expect fare down and back and ticket but I believe where there is such a chance ought to improve it. I don't approve of going in for anything but the plainest of clothes in school so am not extravagant
in that line. I must stop and get my Sunday school lesson. After church – still cold as Greenland, hope it will moderate before Wed. But it will make good skating. I think I shall make a sofa pillow next term felt with Kensington embroidery. Alice Twitchell will show me how to do it. Mrs Bolton has two Calla blossoms and a bud. You must have a warm schoolroom if you have plants. I would like to pop into your room & surprise you. I ought to have made some calls this week but didn't have time. Two of the aristocratic ladies of the place called on me this week but I was wasn't here. The people are very pleasant. Does anybody wear hoops where you are? Be sure and answer this.

I believe I shall give them up. I hate to, but suppose it is not stylish is wear them now. I have been reading “Yesterdays with Authors” I liked it very much. They have lots of new books in the library that I want to read next term. I think all three girls will “insist” on speaking before the college sas in [sic] as “the other boys” [sic] We hate to but think it best. I am eating popcorn between the lines. Do you have it? I shan't do much else today but write if I don't finish this before long. I began it before breakfast. I shall get some winter things when I go home I hope. I want a black muff & I may get one. I wore my mittens today it was so cold. I am going to put in a gore [sic]

into it that tight finger of those black gloves this vacation. There are several other little odd jobs I have saved up to do then. I tore a little hole in the back of my blue waist right on the shoulder blade on a nail. Am going to have it mended at home if I can find some little silk to match. May Bolton and Alice Twitchell are going to make a sofa pillow the same as I am that is our plan now. I am going over now so will stop till next time.

Fondly
Belle

HOPE IN TIMES OF DESPAIR: CONSIDERING LESBIANS IN RUSSIA WITH PROFESSOR LAURIE ESSIG

BY CAT LA ROCHE ’21

In November 2019, GSFS Director Laurie Essig delivered a talk for the presidential plenary of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies in San Francisco. Last year’s conference centered on the topic of “belief.” The event coincided with the 20th anniversary of Dr. Essig’s first book, *Queer in Russia*, which proved to be a good occasion to revisit the contents of the book and to further explore how hope can thrive under authoritarian regimes and in other times of despair.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

CLR: What did your talk center on?

LE: I was thinking about how to imagine our time, which is marked by an abundance of incredibly anti-feminist, anti-woman, anti-queer, racist and xenophobic regimes, including the Putin regime and Trump’s America, and wondered: What’s a way to imagine hope in those seemingly hopeless spaces? My mind immediately went to Afro-optimism, Afro-futurism and its relationship to Afro-pessimism.

Critical race theory and Black Studies both explore the notion that to be Black is not to be part of humanity. Blackness was conceived as that which was not human, and to be a Black body is just to be a fungible [easily replaceable] object of violence—there is no possibility of achieving humanity. I’m not saying I agree or disagree with Afro-pessimism. I think in many ways the movement is on to something—but I think it can’t really imagine a way out, it’s a dead-end.

It’s interesting to compare it with the opposite discourses of Afro-futurism and Afro-optimism. Think about projects such as #BlackGirlMagic or Wakanda or how people can imagine Blackness as a source of futures that are so powerfully empowered that they’re almost fantastical and yet also plausible.

I was taking these two notions and applying them to Russia, where to be lesbian, gay, trans, or queer means that you are unable to be around children, speak about your life, and you will potentially be murdered. I’m not saying the situation of the LGBTQ population in Russia equals that of Black people in the U.S., yet intrinsic to it is a certain level of abject-ness and lack of human-ness as part of the project of oppression.

CLR: I like the way you phrased it in your article—that LGBTQ+ existence is impossible but also insists on being possible.

LE: Right. To me, that’s the point of Afro-optimism—to acknowledge the truth of what happens to Black bodies but at the same time, to talk about the amazing, beautiful visions of the world that come up in Black lives. The same thing happens in lesbian, gay, trans, and queer lives in Russia. I started interviewing some lesbians through a snowball sample, because I was thinking of the abject-ness of lesbians. At least in many Western contexts, the figure of the lesbian
gets labelled as outdated, transphobic, TERF, as this absolutely impossible figure to embody. I was thinking about how people are embodying this figure in Putin’s Russia in quite resistant ways. They can imagine that a different world is possible, and actually start to enact that world in their own lives. They refuse their dehumanization—both as women and as lesbians—within the misogynist and anti-feminist discourses that surround us.

I managed to conduct interviews with a small number who were in no way representative of anything—except the possibility of constructing a life that is lesbo-optimistic in the face of homopessimism.

CLR: How did the people that you interviewed fit into U.S. dominant discourses versus Russia’s own history?

LE: I would say most educated, privileged Russians, they do a little bit of both. So that there’s kind of a mix of reading Western literature and watching movies and also having their own Russian cultural background and Russian ways of seeing things. I think a lot of people who have knowledge of more than one culture or more than one language are negotiating all these discourses. We [in the West] think that we invented sexuality and we think our way of doing things is the right way. When we invented gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and straight people, we thought: “This is the way it is, this is how everyone needs to see it.” And if you don’t, it’s because you’re backwards. We also invented visibility politics. We felt that everybody has to do it our way—people have to come out of the closet and if you don’t, then they are backwards.

Foucault says that the homosexual was born as a species in the West. It wasn’t quite that way in Russia. If you were, say, a gay man and got sent to a camp in Siberia in the Soviet Union, you were expected to come back reformed. Lesbian women were generally considered psychologically ill, but the authorities still felt like their “problem” could be solved. The situation in Russia today is not so different from the Evangelical discourse in the U.S., which focuses on re-orienting gays and lesbians towards straight life. That is why it is not surprising that from the 2000s on, Christian evangelicals from the U.S. and Russian conservatives have been collaborating to create a joint discourse. Many evangelicals really respect what that Vladimir Putin has enacted anti-LGBTQ laws and they want the U.S. to follow suit.

The whole notion of “protecting the children” is an evangelical discourse, right? American anti-gay activist Anita Bryant has tried to “save our children” from being corrupted by “homosexuals.” In Russia, the anti-homosexual propaganda laws are against “non-traditional sexual values,” but this discourse translates almost directly as “family values.” In “The New Sexual Cold War,” my colleague Alexander Kondakov and I write about how these discourses circulate—this particular discourse is not only located in Russia—where LGBTQ+ people are not a species—but also in the United States. It’s a very different history but it’s one that intersects with U.S. history quite tightly now—through these international circles of anti-queer expertise.

CLR: Many of your interviewees seemed to feel that they were exceptionally lucky. Can you please explain this further?

LE: People feel lucky when they have not yet been arrested and when they continue to live outside the violent structures that try to erase them. Thus far, they say, they have not been fired from their jobs. But to be clear, people are being killed all the time, including by the government. There is state and socially-sanctioned violence at a large level that attempts to erase these bodies, dehumanizing them at every turn. Within those conditions, my interviewees have managed to create a kind of lesbo-optimism that, to me, is akin to “Black girl magic.” It’s akin to me as saying: I, as this debased figure, whose humanity is denied by both the state and the society, insist on the beauty of my existence.