

# DECONSTRUCT THIS!

Views from 316



Women Studies Senior Seminar / Spring 2006

## WE ARE WOMS 690: SENIOR SEMINAR, SPRING 2006

"History and biography when questioned would seem to show that her position in the home of freedom has been different from her brothers; and psychology would seem to hint that history is not without its effect upon mind and body" (Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*). **Tasia Bloxson** is a Women Studies major who resists the forces that seek to crush her.

**Maggie Frankel** likes critical theory and her subscription to *Teen Vogue*.

I raised my head. A slight young weed  
had pushed up through the heart and its  
green head was nodding on the breast.  
(All this was in the dark.)  
- Elizabeth Bishop "The Weed."

**Kathrin Hüsler.**

"After I slowly tore off the Band-Aid, I realized I had never been injured in the first place" **Cortnee Langlie.**

**Denise Lujan** is a San Francisco native graduating with a BA in Women Studies. She is a mother who believes that children on leashes should have their parents spayed or neutered.

**Michele Martinez's** journey in Women Studies has surprisingly led her down the path of human sexuality studies. She has been accepted into the M.A. program in Human Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University for Fall 2006.



**Genevieve Maxwell** sings at work; is typically covered in dog hair; likes to space out to music; works as a bicycle mechanic; is from Atascadero, CA; is goofy to the max!

**Karen Mejia** is a Women Studies major and a minor in Women's Health. She strongly feels that the U.S. government's regulation of women's bodies needs to come to an end.

**Deborah L. Michel** is a senior majoring in both Women and Cinema Studies, planning to continue her studies at UC Berkeley and/or UC Davis. Fascinated by the intersections of gender, class, and cultural privilege as they are expressed in visual media and literature, her future goal is to become a university professor and publish.

**Keri Montgomery** will be graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Women Studies in Fall, 2006. After working in women's health for ten years, she will further her studies in nursing and midwifery at UCSF. Friends and family are endlessly entertained by her unique and witty sense of humor.

"Cultural terrorism should be a goal for all people with a good sense of humor" (John Waters). **Desiree Valdez**, Spring 2007, Independent Major in Indigenous Gender Studies.

Welcome to "**Deconstruct This! Views from 316**," the first collaborative capstone project in Women Studies at SFSU. This publication contains critical essays, poetry, fiction and personal essays written by the students of WOMS 690. Students have collaboratively edited and produced this volume in Room 316 of the Humanities Building, the Women Studies Resource Room. Members of the seminar have gleaned work for this volume from previous and present courses and have also written some original pieces specifically for this occasion. I hope that you enjoy the work presented in these pages, and that you accept the seminar's invitation to "deconstruct this!"

~ Deborah Cohler, Assistant Professor of Women Studies, SFSU

## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ONE WOMEN STUDIES SENIOR

by Maggie Frankel

I am back in high school, and I am getting yelled at *again* for organizing students for political reasons on campus. I feel distanced and bored as the vice principal waves his arms around wildly and tries to explain the benefits of conformity. His voice becomes rhythmic, a shrill beeping, and seconds before I retort with the most brilliant response ever — I jump out of bed in my dark little studio to deactivate the alarm clock. It's 5:08 A.M. Time to get ready for work.

I will spare you the details of my jumping into the shower and pulling on yesterday's clothes — while I impress to you that my story is not universal to the lives of all Women Studies students at San Francisco State University. In my 5 ½ years of women studies, one of my main lessons has been that we all have very different backgrounds, lifestyles, and interests. A common set of understandings about gender and nation is what brings us together. It's still dark outside as I am pulling my bicycle out of the elevator, and into the 1st floor lobby of my downtown apartment building.

My eyes still blurry, and my mind still pondering my dream, the first thing that faces me as I push my bike outdoors is a new two-story tall billboard for a cheap brand of beer. An airbrushed blonde woman in a bikini and a fake smile is holding a football in one hand and a bottle in the other. The whole scene is framed by crystalline chunks of ice, drips of water, and the red script logo of the brand name. Great. The first sample of female objectification to sell beer to straight men of the day. It's forty degrees out and I would offer her my jacket if she were more than a cardboard symbol of the inextricable link between patriarchy and capitalism.

Later at my coffee job in The Castro, as my co-worker and I are idly flipping through a copy of *The Advocate* (a mainstream American gay magazine) before our 8:30 A.M. rush. He holds the page open and excitedly points to an advertisement for a gay cruise line. Tanned, attractive white men in Speedos and flowered leis smile and hold hands amongst palm trees and huts. "Wouldn't that be heaven!" he gushes. I distract myself with a customer, and internally stew about the racism and imperialism implicit in *all* cruises, let alone the limiting issues of class, sexuality, and agency in the gay cruise advertised. In my head, I plan a way to subtly educate him about these things on another day.

Right before my lunch break, one of my favorite customers comes in. James with the triple non-fat latte. Though usually chipper, today James is disgruntled. "What's up, James?" He tells me that he is sick of the homeless people outside, and that he wishes a car would just swerve off of the street and eliminate all of them. I

bite my tongue in order to retain my job. While James pays for his beverage, I mentally negotiate privilege. He is a gay man in the Castro wearing a one-hundred-dollar polo shirt. Outside of the safety net of the Castro, he would be a minority subject to ridicule similar to his own. I have been at this job for over a year and-a-half, and James' *complaint* is not uncommon in the neighborhood.

On my way home from work, I rent a movie. It's a Friday and I want to wind down from a week full of school and work with something silly and mundane. I choose the new Jim Carrey movie from the DVD rental machine at Safeway. Something about Dick, Jane, and bank robberies. Bad choice, since my critical mind never slows. Before the movie even reaches its half-way point, I am literally hissing and spitting at the movie's misogynist positionality and racist caricatures. I turn it off and think "Jeez, there goes yet another unfinished movie." I close my eyes, sure to continue the analysis in my dreams.

This happens a lot. All of it. I snarl at billboards, doublethink *liberal* practices, over-analyze people's words, and leave half-way through movies on a regular basis. I strive to remain constantly aware of racism, sexism, classism, and imperialism, as I have learned to do in my education. Some might think that this takes the fun out of everything. I think that it makes it more interesting, and contributes to my own experience as an informed individual.



## BETWEEN TWO NATIONS

by Karen Mejia

In 1932, "Borderline between Mexico and the United States," was a painting by Frida Kahlo.<sup>1</sup> The painting includes a self-portrait of Kahlo eloquently standing between the U.S and Mexico border. Kahlo demonstrates the United States as a capitalist country where she symbolically includes a factory labeled FORD and a crowding of buildings in the background. She provides the viewer with the evidence that it is the United States by including the American flag over a stream of smoke coming out of the factory. In comparison, Mexico is represented by an Aztec ruin with cloudy skies surrounding the sun and the moon with lightning striking down the ruin. She gives the viewer a sense that the Mexican land has rich soil by including flowers and roots. Yet, on the American land she represents soil with no richness by including wires instead of roots and no available space.

What is Frida possibly trying to state in her painting where she is standing between Mexico and the United States? Through a women studies analysis, one can tie in several points that Frida Kahlo may have wanted to state. The most obvious one is the connection that the United States has with globalization. This interpretation can be made because she includes a U.S Factory on the right side — that is the symbol of capitalism — and on the left side she displays an Aztec ruin that represents Mexico. She also painted wires on the United States reaching the Mexican soil which could be seen as how technology has advanced so much that companies owned by "first world" countries can run their companies around the world with just computers. "First world countries" have a great impact on exploiting "third world countries" with globalization. For instance, there are many American factories that are placed in "third world countries" and Mexico is an example. Companies like Deltronics, General Motors, Panasonic and Zettler that are owned by "first world countries," are placed throughout Mexico.<sup>2</sup> The women there work under deplorable conditions and are paid very poorly. The Human Rights Watch has reported incidents where women were given pregnancy tests before getting jobs from American companies such as Zettler.<sup>2</sup> If these women test positive they are denied to work. There are

not just cases of discrimination, but these companies pay women very poorly. For instance, Nike sweat shops in Korea pay women 14 cents an hour, when Nike can minimally charge customers \$80 for a pair of shoes.<sup>2</sup>

Though the image was painted in 1932, it can be tied to current issues such as immigration. Standing between Mexico and U.S, Kahlo can signify the indivisible borderline that the U.S government has created to separate people from Mexico crossing over to the U.S. Recently, the House of Representatives considered legislation that will criminalize immigrants; the bill will make "illegal immigrants" and those that hire "illegal immigrants" felons.<sup>3</sup> On May 1, 2006 thousands of people protested against the U.S government trying to criminalize immigrants and deny them citizenship. It is absurd that a country like the United States that was built by immigrants and continues to exploit immigrants wants to currently deny people the right to be in the U.S.

Frida Kahlo's image of "Borderline Between Mexico and the United States" will have a historic importance for many people. This painting cannot only be tied into historic issues but also the issues that presently exist. "Borderline Between Mexico and the United States" is a rich painting where Kahlo includes important symbols of capitalism, globalization; as well as the division of two nations by borders. Much of the exploitation that exists around the world is due to capitalism and globalization. The militarization of the U.S and Mexico borders maintains western perspective of the "other."

To say that you are afraid of us, that to put distance between us, you wear the mask of contempt. Admit that Mexico is your double, that she exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irrevocably tied to her.

~ Gloria Anzaldúa



<sup>1</sup> To view "Borderline between Mexico and the United States" go to, <http://cgfa.sunsite.dk/kahlo/p-kahlo28.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Sex Discrimination in the Maquiladoras." Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan. *An Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in a Transnational World*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Cabanatuan, Michael. "Across the Nation, a Rallying Call for Immigrants." *San Francisco Chronicle*. A1, A9: May, 2006.

## FILM REVIEW: DERAILED

by Tasia Bloxsom

Every film has a given ideological perspective that privileges certain characters, institutions, behaviors, and motives as attractive, and downgrades an opposing set as repellent.<sup>1</sup> Hollywood films serve to reinforce patriarchy through heteronormative narratives that perpetuate gendered stereotypes. They do not place women in a true position of power; rather they reinforce male influence over the lives of women. *Derailed* (2005) is no exception to this rule. The film tells the story of Charles (Clive Owens), a family man, with a sweet wife, and a sick daughter awaiting a kidney transplant. On his regular commute to Manhattan from the safety of his perfect white suburban castle, he meets Lucinda (Jennifer Anniston), an attractive young business woman on the train, and after a number of flirtations they decide to have an affair. Yet during their secret hotel escapade, a male intruder interrupts and attacks them, raping Lucinda and blackmailing Charles in return for keeping the infidelity a secret. It is later revealed that Lucinda is actually working with the villain and it is all a hoax to rob married men. Poor Charles is caught in a game of cat and mouse, having to endanger his family and his hard-earned, manly dollars.

The Hollywood male's presence depends on the promise of power he embodies whether it be moral, physical, economic, social or sexual<sup>2</sup>. Charles is a man with great familial responsibility as the dependable breadwinner, supplementing his wife's measly school teacher salary to help pay for their daughter's medicine. The sexual blackmail threatens his moral and economic status. Representations of women are shallow, falling into a binary of "the good girl or "femme fatale", who is "not necessarily one who kills but one who "ruins" men, hence establishing an equation between the loss of male ego and death."<sup>3</sup> Lucinda's character is intrinsically linked to the male hero, a man that falls for a fantasy woman who appears perfect and then turns out to be evil. His heroism is ensured through the downfall of both the evil woman and the rescue of the good woman. The "good girl" is represented in the wife and daughter and at first Lucinda, ironically played by Anniston, "America's Sweetheart." Lucinda is a nice woman on the train who agrees to pay for his ticket when he forgets to buy one. They decide to meet for lunch and through

their conversations they discuss families, life histories, and it seems that she too is a good, hard-working parent just being friendly. It is only when he seduces her with a little kiss and a few shots of whisky, surprise surprise, that she alludes to a sexual liaison. Lucinda never actually agrees to have sex with him and in fact never does, which allows the suspension of belief that she is an innocent victim of an evil plot, the good girl that made a mistake. After agreeing to go with Charles, Lucinda wants to stop the cab and not go through with it — it just so happens it stops in front of a hotel. Oops, what a coincidence!

True to the sexual thriller genre, the woman inspires the male character's desire for control through sexual conquest. John Berger states that "a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Presence for a woman is so intrinsic to her person that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emanation, a kind of heat or smell or aura" (280). Within the visual context of cinema, the sexual woman becomes a stimulus for both the male character and the viewer. The first glimpse we have Lucinda is just of her legs, in stockings and high heels, and the following shot reveals that every man on train is staring at her. We are instantaneously aligned with the male gaze. In the hotel scene, she sits nervously anticipating her actions, gazing in the mirror, thus viewing herself as a sexual object.

Thrillers such as this are rife with sexualized violence against women and this is intended to excite the audience. Personally it disturbs me. Anticipating a hot sex scene between two consenting adults, the audience is surprised with a rape scene that suddenly turns Lucinda from the alluring yet innocent woman into an object of sexual violence. We don't see the actual rape but we can imagine it from her cries, and blurred sequences. The bad guy with his gun as phallus represents male power through violence. The hero is prevented from saving the damsel in distress because the villain overpowers him physically demasculinizing him with the gun. Lucinda's act of weakness is doubly punished, by being defiled as a sex object and having to be quiet about it to protect all involved. She later reaches martyrdom by her forced silence about the rape and a subsequent abortion.

By playing the role of the innocent victim, Lucinda lures him into the plot. As it turns out she is simply an "evil bitch" who took him for a ride — she's sleeping with the enemy, she isn't a corporate executive but a mere temp, using her sexuality for money, and taking advantage of poor innocent nice guys. Charles didn't really commit adultery (though he would have) and sacrifices the money for his child's transplant to protect the innocence of his wife, poor dear. As Philip Green explains, "the ideological stance of familial heterosexuality is preserved by having sexually

<sup>1</sup> Giannetti, Louis D. *Understanding Movies*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall 1972, p. 428.

<sup>2</sup> Berger, John. "Ways of Seeing." Inderpal Grewal & Caren Kaplan. *An Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in a Transnational World*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006, p. 280.

<sup>3</sup> Fischer, Lucy. *Murder, She Wrote: Women Who Kill*. Princeton University Press, 1989.



aggressive women come to bad ends."<sup>4</sup> In a final confrontation our hero Charles, intercepts the repetition of the hoax with a new victim, and after a struggle, Lucinda is accidentally shot. This symbolic death of the bad girl allows a restoration of male heroic power. The woman that allows herself to be captured in the chase engages in a form of masochism. Right before dying, Lucinda's admission of guilt that Charles had sacrificed the money for his child's transplant to the blackmail shows that she is still motherly and compassionate in that "feminine" way. Charles is almost moved to "rescue" her from death in this moment of weakness. The two men subsequently fight it out to the end of the film and family peace is restored. The wife never knows a thing and the daughter gets her kidney, phew!

It is highly disappointing as a feminist and lover of film that the same old tired narratives of heterosexual intrigue shrouded in sexual violence plagues our movie screens. *Derailed* is an utter cliché, offering nothing more than a glorified warning against extra marital affairs wherein the sexual temptress is punished and the family man lives to save the day.

## YOUR BODY AND THE INTERESTS OF THE NATION

by Keri Montgomery

Women's reproductive rights movements have traditionally fought for women to be able to obtain reliable methods of birth control including sterilization. "The women's movement, throughout most phases, has stood for birth control and reproductive freedom as a social precondition for sexual equality" (Shapiro 12).<sup>5</sup> Yet there is the question about the nature of medical practices created to ensure women's reproductive rights. Women's organizations have provided access to services that would often be unavailable to women without insurance or money; however, they are often funded and controlled by either the government or some private party that could have their own interests or agenda in mind. Population control is the attempt to control the reproductive choices of women by force or coercion in the interest of a particular group, institution, or nation. These attempts are based on cultural, racial, or class assumptions; this is a practice known as the "science" of eugenics, "based on Darwinian ideas of selecting the

most 'superior' races to reproduce while discouraging or eliminating those races believed to be inferior."<sup>6</sup>

The reproductive rights of women are dependent on the current needs of a dominant capitalist society; family planning services are one of the most common to face attack throughout the world. Women today and throughout history have been forced, coerced, tricked, lied to, and frightened into making personal reproductive choices by those in power. Women of lower socioeconomic levels and racial and ethnic minorities have been targets of population control for centuries; a pattern emerges where women are used as reproducing guinea pigs. Those who fit the classist, racist ideal are compelled into reproduction; those who are deemed undesirable are steered toward annihilation of their culture. Women with low incomes and women of color are often directed toward IUD's, Depo Provera, sterilization, and the now-recalled Norplant. I have seen this practice myself working among clinicians of all types. These methods are more permanent, have greater risks, and allow complete medical control over a woman's fertility. "In the United States, the use of contraceptive devices often varies according to class, gender, and race, indicating that broad social conditions, cultural traditions, and structural inequalities play a large part in shaping a woman's birth control experience" (Shapiro 9).

Elective abortion is the most fought over women's health care issue today. Ironically, eugenics-driven pro-life protesters are in front of clinics shouting and waving their signs, apparently in the face of all women entering the clinic. Yet, as a women's health care worker I have seen white women be harassed while women of color are ignored and walk freely into the clinic. Even in history the "founder" of the birth control movement Margaret Sanger said, "All of our problems are the result of over breeding among the working class" (Shapiro 42). Reproductive freedom is a right for all women regardless of their racial or ethnic identity, class, or any reason. Women must educate themselves about their reproductive options and fight for the ones they do not have. Only with a commitment from all women and men will change come.

In the heat of such movements brains are set stirring with new ideas, which live on through quieter times, waiting for another opportunity to ignite into action and change the world around us. ~ Howard Zinn

<sup>4</sup> Green, Philip. *Cracks in the Pedestal: Ideology and Gender in Hollywood*. Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Shapiro, T. *Population Control Politics: Women, Sterilization, and Reproductive Choice*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon, Linda. "Malthusianism." *An Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in a Transnational World*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Comp. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006.

UNDERSTANDING IDENTITIES, FORGING CONNECTIONS  
by Kathrin Hüsler and Desiree Valdez

I think we need a solution to the problem of walking from one of one's groups to another, being mistreated, misunderstood, engaging in self-abuse and self-betrayal for the sake of the group that only distorts our needs because they erase our complexity. (Lugones, 473)

**Desiree:** My father was raised by second generation Mexican-Americans. The cultural traditions he has passed on to my brothers and me are not lingual or conventional. My mother's ancestors were Polish and Irish, among others. She feels strong ties to her Irish heritage, but we never celebrated anything that was traditionally Irish or Polish when I was growing up. While my parents made sure that I understood who my ancestors were, I never had a strong sense of cultural affiliation.

I grew up not identifying with Irish-American, Polish-American or Chicana/o culture. When people look at my last name, they expect someone different from what they see in front of them. The confused expression on their faces betrays their preconceptions of how someone with the last name of *Valdez* should look. In the Chicana/o community, I am seen as a *gringa*, a "white girl." When I move about in the dominant racist culture based on the superiority of whiteness, I am a "half-breed." I honestly do not know where I belong. I am envious of people who have a set of traditions and a specific culture to identify with.

In my quest to understand my cultural heritage, I have found that there are less tangible forms of cultural identity. I have feelings of cultural belonging when my mother shows me a piece of art that represents where my ancestors come from, when I eat one of my father's dishes that reminds him of his upbringing, when I listen to an elder speak, or when I honor the cultural variety that exists within myself. I base my identity on these feelings. I am a physical representation of my culture and I respect those who might not view me in the same way.

When I think of my own people, the only people I can think of as my own are transitionals, liminals, border-dwellers, 'world'-travelers, beings in the middle of either/or. (Lugones, 469)

**Kathrin:** My ancestors were farmers in the Swiss Alps and still today, most of my relatives live in Switzerland. Nonetheless, I often feel like a "being in the middle of either/or." I never belonged to a community of people with similar interests, backgrounds, or politics. Back in

Switzerland, some of my friends were from Italy, Egypt, Belgium, some were going towards forty and others were barely twenty, some came from rich and others from poor families, some had gone to high school and others had learned a job in an apprenticeship. They were electricians, nurses, doctors, bank consultants, musicians, or unemployed. Oftentimes, my friends couldn't stand each other because of their differences. As a consequence, I never felt like I belonged to a community. I simply enjoyed the company of a diverse bunch of people whose identifications were just as complex as mine.

When I came to San Francisco I heard rumors about communities where people could be themselves, accepted in their complexity. But in the Lexington or at the Cat Club's "Hot Pants" party, I felt an exclusive sentiment that I can paraphrase as "similarity equals membership, or I'm sorry, you're a loser." It reminded me of dumb high school movies. Was this the praised "lesbian community?" If your hair is too long, your accent not "San Francisco" enough, you came out too recently, or your politics don't conform to the correct working class or at least pretend working class anarchist attitude, you will be a community-deprived lesbian in this city. For me, rumors about community remain rumors. I neither fit in with "the lesbians" nor "the writers," but I have certainly met a lot of great individuals in both circles and also outside of them. Mostly, they are "transitionals, liminals, border-dwellers, [and] 'world'-travelers" like me.

I don't think we can consider 'our own' only those who reject the same dichotomies we do. It is the impulse to reject dichotomies and to live and embody that rejection that gives us some hope of standing together as people who recognize each other in our complexity. (Lugones, 477)

**Desiree and Kathrin:** The most important part of allowing the expression of variability within identities is recognizing that there are many people who are complex in their identities. Communities that use these complexities as a basis to reject acceptance into them are not acknowledging the wealth of experience and knowledge that people living in the middle or on the fringes can offer. Opening up to the complexities of identity and acknowledging that sameness does not always constitute a community or identity is the beginning of promoting the visibility of those who are in the middle or who feel they are outside of these apparently exclusive communities. We greatly value cultural communities, but hope that they can become more flexible in order to incorporate changing and diverse populations.

If we judge people based simply on their looks and our preconceptions, we are not better than mainstream society with its stereotyping tendencies. Only through dialogue can we get an adequate understanding of other people's positionality in a complex web of power in which gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and many more factors influence what possibilities individuals have in society. Mostly, there's more complexity and depth to people than we think. Through dialogue we can come to know other people's struggles and communicate our own concerns. This is not about disregarding power structures, but about bridging the gaps between our complex identities. It's a fact that we learn something if we have a little chat with the homeless woman at the corner of our street. And that Caucasian man wearing a Gap sweater could just as well be half-Latino and a single dad.

Work Cited:

Lugones, Maria. "Purity, Impurity, and Separation." *Signs* Winter 1994: 458-479.

## ESSENTIALISM AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

by Michele Martinez

Essentialism and social construction are opposing theories of how and why cultures operate through systems of gender, race and sexuality. Historically, the consequences of each theory have contributed to the reshaping of these systems. Essentialism maintains that biology genetically determines traits or patterns specific to individuals or cultures that are inevitable and unchanging, which hold a fixed meaning across time and place. Social construction argues that such traits or patterns specific to individuals or cultures are culturally constructed and are not necessarily innate. Therefore, these traits or patterns do not have shape until culture forms them, providing a context in which meaning and significance are applied.

Essentialism is present in culture through the use of science. Science is accepted and promoted as unchanging, factual knowledge and is used to support the claim of the biological superiority of men over women, justifying women's subordination and oppression. In "The Biological Connection," Anne Fausto-Sterling points out how "scientists themselves emerge as cultural products, their activities structured, often unconsciously, by the great social issues of the day."<sup>7</sup> This prompts us to take a closer look at the

cultural and social agenda that is being advocated by scientific research. The political and cultural consequences of essentialist thinking for women and gender relations are the seemingly natural attribution of power, domination and control to males, and passive subordination to females. This produces and reproduces gender inequality.

Social construction is present in culture through the categorization of people by race. Although historically race was considered a biological difference among groups of people in diverse cultures, there is no biological gene that determines race. Therefore, race is a social construction. If race has no biological significance, it is upheld only by the social construction that categorizes it. Social construction takes into account various historical, political and social factors, which changes the meaning over time. For example, the meaning of race started out as biological, but has shifted away towards the social structure in which it exists.

Social construction challenges gender by arguing that social role assignment to each of the sexes is not a reflection of biology, but of a culture's structure; these assigned roles vary greatly across cultures and throughout history. Social construction challenges race by arguing that race is not biologically fixed, but rather a social construction with a meaning that varies within certain contexts. Social construction challenges sexuality by arguing that sexual behavior and meaning are products of social, historical and cultural context denying that, for example, an individual sex act has an unchanging meaning across time, place and gender.

Essentialism and social construction have shaped the way we view cultures and the world. The two theories enable us to examine historical as well as present concepts as to the nature of cultural systems of gender, race, and sexuality.



<sup>7</sup> Anne Fausto-Sterling, "The Biological Connection." *An Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in a Transnational World*. Eds. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002, page 42.



## GRRRRRR GIRL

by Tasia Bloxsom

There are those that believe that feminists are just a bunch of  
angry women with hairy legs  
that hate men.

Well I am an angry woman.

I am angry that our president insists on sending young people blinded by patriotism into battle with other young  
people, equally disillusioned by their own position, and yet fighting to the  
death over oil.

I am angry that women are  
raped, battered, slaughtered and discarded of everyday,  
in the streets, in the battlefields, and in their homes.

I am angry that I cannot walk peacefully down the streets occupied by only my  
own thoughts without the intrusion of a sexual remark from a male pedestrian who is  
virtually stripping me of my clothes as I pass by.

I am angry that billions of mothers do not have enough access to resources nor  
the responsibility of their communities or male partners to feed, clothe, educate and keep their children in good health.

I am angry that  
women are denied the right  
to a legal safe abortion.

I am angry that young girls are put upon before they are even in school  
the role that they must play  
inside and out.

I am angry at a television set that seeks to  
feed me lies  
because anything else would be too  
fattening.

I am angry that I hate my body parts as though they were some kind of  
horrible disfigurement  
instead of being happy that I have all my arms and legs.

I am angry that people are sentenced to  
death or imprisonment  
when they have not committed a crime, whilst  
murderers and rapists roam free.

I am angry that there is so much hate and anger in the world to begin with and that  
hate and anger is what divides us from each other.

## MORE THAN HANDS

Film Review: *These Hands*  
by Denise Lujan

*These Hands* (1992) directed by African film maker Flora M'mbugu-Schelling is a very moving film that follows a day in the life of Mozambican refugee women at their work. The women work in a quarry in Dar es Salaam, and their job is to crush rocks. They work relentlessly in the burning heat, some with their children playing in the dirt and some with children strapped to their backs. They vary in age, some teenagers and some that are very elderly. They sing songs beautifully helping each other to pass time, and assist each other in different tasks. Others are shown cooking for those who are working. When the women are crushing the rocks, they do so by hand, sitting on the dirt, building piles of small rocks. They injure their hands with their makeshift mallets, yet as they bleed they continue to work. Because truly their hands, though dry, cracked, and sunburned are their most important tools.

Art finds validation in the artist who creates it and the viewer who sees the significance in it.

The film has no narration or direct speaking to the camera, but words are not needed in showing the plight of these women. This forces the viewer to question the film's purpose. Seemingly this is a job no one would do willingly. However, at the end of the film a caption appears that tells the viewer who these women are and why they are doing this. The rocks will be sent to a concrete company who will use the rocks as gravel to make concrete. The women work in groups in order to work faster in hopes of earning more money. They work more than ten hours a day and receive about nine dollars every two weeks.

The silence of the film is important because it leaves the viewers to question why these women would do such a job and subject themselves to such harsh conditions. The answer is: they have no other choice. Due to globalization third world women have very little opportunity for economic growth, therefore they are subjected to exploitation. International government policies such as NAFTA make it acceptable for countries to exploit their citizens. This is not unusual: other examples can be seen in countries such as Mexico with the maquiladoras and in many Asian countries such as China and even in the United States where there are sweat shops.

In their discussion of globalization M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty state, "in neo-colonial contexts, state managers facilitate the entry and

diffusion of international capital within national boundaries and help to produce an exploited feminized workforce in export-processing zones."<sup>8</sup> The intersections of gender, class and ethnicity are always effected by globalization. In third world countries women bear double burdens as seen in the film. First as mothers who primarily care for their children and secondly as economic providers. Women have few job opportunities in third-world countries, so they turn to jobs that earn them little money for hard work. They do not receive the luxuries such as overtime, vacation, sick leave or medical benefits. They must work at these arduous jobs not to afford cell phones or cable TV, but to survive.

M'mbugu-Schelling offers a significant alternative to mainstream films. Most films that enjoy great economic success do so because of their refusal to acknowledge social inequalities or injustices. They do not break boundaries or challenge dominant ideology. Films, such as *These Hands* are made not to make money, but to offer agency, a voice to those who do not have one. An institutional space is not what validates art, but rather it finds validation in the artist who creates it and the viewer who sees the significance in it.



Image: D. Michel

<sup>1</sup> M Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Genealogies, Legacies, Movements" in *Feminism and Race- Oxford Readings in Feminism*. Bhavnani ed. Oxford University Press, 2001. (pp.501)

2. *These Hands*. Flora M'mbugu-Schelling. 1992-Tanzania- Documentary.

## THE FEMININE SOLDIER

by Cortnee L. Langlie

The construction of femininity in the context of militarism is constituent of other powerfully gendered notions allied with nationalism and citizenship. Together, the numerous binaries contrasting male and female, soldier versus civilian, are foundational for the most deeply rooted conceptions of gender essentially linked to aggression and reproduction. As a result, if a person does not conform to these guidelines they could easily be considered treasonous — even in a democracy founded on liberal notions of Enlightenment.

While these notions are not immovable they are still very much present. An exemplary display of rigid, yet changing adherence to traditional notions of gender is an increase of women serving in the United States military, as noted by journalist Nancy Gibbs in her *Time* magazine article "An American Family Goes to War." The article masquerades as unbiased prose laced with factual statistics, when actually it is riddled with subjective opinions about mothers in the military. The problem lies in positing a mother's military success as contingent upon abandoning more traditional motherly duties. For example, a dramatic photograph of 12-year old Lauren Richardson is positioned in subversive contrast to a description of her mother, Laura Richardson and her "rising star" status in the military (Gibbs 31). There is barely any mention of Laura's husband, Jim, and his fatherly responsibilities in the familial context. The *fact* is, the *Time* magazine cover in which the article "An American Family Goes to War" appears, is actually emblazoned with the title "When Mom Goes to War," serving to further illustrate the purposeful focus on the divided duties of the mother as soldier, while the father as soldier remains an unquestioned convention.

The military, itself, is full of gendered notions of men and women. According to Jennifer Turpin in her article, "Many Faces: Women Confronting War," in many instances soldiers are even attacked using gender discrepancies that the military continues to uphold; "They [anti-militarist feminists] point out that military indoctrination for men generally includes the systematic denigration of all that is 'feminine.' Male recruits are often called 'girls' as a form of humiliation, and they often chant sexist lyrics as part of training," (Turpin 10). For this reason, cultural feminists argue that equal access to the military is not desirable, expressing a highly gendered fear that women serving in the military will damage the pacifist nature of women. For others, the strict adherence to notions of masculine superiority in the military makes its access all the more important. Very often politics and the military are deeply

intertwined, as argued by liberal feminists (Turpin 14), and not many would argue that women should have less political clout. Therefore, participation in the military is a necessity for gaining political access.

By indicting pacifist notions of femininity as weaker to masculinity, essentialism can be defeated on its own terms even if the process is an uncomfortable one, which Cynthia Enloe describes in a chapter entitled "How Do They Militarize a Can of Soup?" in her book *Maneuvers*. Though it deals with the problematic nature of militarization, Enloe admits the value in becoming involved in military process: "Every transformative movement, including those informed by feminism, takes a risk if it engages with the central state's elite. It might be a risk well worth taking. But engagement with those state policy makers whose specialty is military affairs doubles that risk precisely because centralization, secrecy, masculinized pride, and masculinized expertise are so tightly woven into the very processes of state military policy making" (Enloe 20). It is precisely for this reason that women should be allowed into forums where there exists *masculinized* notions of anything. The military, being definitive of patriarchy in many respects, may counter many pacifist approaches to conflict but for effective discourse to commence gendered notions of humanity must be exposed.

World peace is definitely the most desirable of all possibilities but the most effective means of attaining a more egalitarian society is to first obtain equality within the armed forces. Essentialism is pervasive within elite, political hierarchies and for valuable discourse to be undertaken we have to look at the armed forces and their policies. When a woman wishes to express her patriotism in a traditionally masculine setting with gendered notions of aggression, it may raise the eyebrows of some pacifist feminists but the reasons behind this reaction must come from a non-essentialist frame of reference. Only then might notions of peace be realized in a fully humanitarian capacity.

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## GIANTS

Fiction by Kathrin Hüsler

I pay for the chocolate-coated banana and bend down to give it to Toby sweetheart, but he's gone. I still feel where his little hand cramped into my jeans and his head leaned warm against my thigh. Despite the gloomy weather, the amusement park is crowded, especially around the always popular candy stand. Toby's black curly head is nowhere; all I can see are legs and garbage on muddy trampled grass. Again, I feel this pressure on my chest as if a giant pushed me up against a concrete wall. I gasp for air. The first time the giant attacked was on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday when my friend Linda gave me a pregnancy test and the two pink lines appeared. I had to sit down on the toilet. My heart stood still and the world became a quiet place. A minute must have passed until I felt Linda shaking me, screaming *Patty, Patty, are you okay?* I wasn't, and the pressure remained. Here is the giant and I'm desperate for oxygen. I run around disoriented, looking for my boy between gray and black people, massive clouds above me reflected in brown puddles. Maybe I should give up, go home alone. It was easier when he couldn't walk. He's such a difficult child.

"So three weeks ago he turned two," the doctor said this morning and scratched the bald spot on his head. "Does he babble?"

"No, he's very quiet. Apart from the crying."

"You're a young mother," he said as if my youth had anything to do with Toby's silence. "Do you talk to him?"

"Of course." I don't like these people who think they're so much better than you just because for them, things worked out. "Toby understands me."

"How do you know?" he asked, patting the protruding belly under his green pinafore. Most likely, all his kids started talking on their first birthday.

"He smiles at me," I said.

The doctor turned away and commanded his assistant to get the next patient. "Come again next month. Talk to the kid."

I always talk to Toby. I sing to him. I try to do everything right. I thought he would love the banana, but now the chocolate melts through the napkin. Who was that kid that just disappeared behind the toilet trailer? I run over. A little girl squats with her pants pulled down next to the iron stairs on which two women queue up. We always have to pee. Women wait in line too much. They frown at me.

"It's not my child," I say. "Did you see a little boy with curly black hair?"

The women shake their heads. Why didn't I hold his hand? Why did I assume he would stay with me?

I walk over to the Ferris wheel when my cell phone rings. It's Rick; I haven't heard from him in months.

"What do you want?" I ask. A girl waves at me from a red gondola high above.

"Patty-girl, I'm lonely," Rick says. I know this voice, that's how he talked to me when we got drunk together. That hot summer, we started drinking on Fridays at noon. How strange that he still does this. We used to buy orange juice and a bottle of gin on our way to the lake. Rick carried his red ice box and a ghetto blaster. In the park under a tree, I spread out my grandma's patchwork throw and played The Verve's "Bitter Sweet Symphony." I didn't get tired of that song. Rick mixed the drinks and I rolled the joints. We made fun of people running around in swimming suits because we thought that we were the hottest species on Earth. I wore my favorite purple skirt and he showed off his copper-tanned biceps. We discussed which tattoos we liked most, watched some Moroccans playing Frisbee, kissed, and went swimming in our clothes. In the evening, we ate spaghetti in his apartment and made love until we fell asleep.

"Patty, I'm lonely," Rick says. So what? Why should I care? He didn't give a shit about me when I found out that it was too late for an abortion. For him, things have been so easy. Because he's unemployed, he doesn't even have to pay. I should be the one complaining about loneliness. I only have mom, grandma, and Linda; everybody else is too cool to hang out with a mother. A fine drizzle sets in and people start leaving the park. Oh jeez, where is Toby? My Toby sweetheart. I really don't have time to spare for pathetic jerks.

"I'm busy; call some other time," I say. Maybe someone abducted Toby. He's so cute in his red dungarees.

"I have a right to talk to my son," Rick says. "I miss him." Yeah, he's drunk. Now all of a sudden, he pretends to care.

"You're ridiculous," I say. "Worry about him when you're sober." I hang up and the drizzle turns into rain. I picture Toby wet and crying, screaming as a hairy man drags him to a car. I can't imagine being without him: I need him. I love how he pulls my hair to wake me up. One time, he found a pink lipstick and colored one of my white sneakers. Oh, Toby. He will be an artist someday. People make it out as if all his difficulties are my fault, but he's just a special child. He might not care to talk. Why should he? Toby prefers listening. When I tell him that I made lasagna he always runs to his highchair. He's different, very sensitive. When I sing "Dona Dona" he cries. The park is deserted and I feel the rain through my jean jacket. Chocolate water runs down my arm and into my sweater. I take a bite of the banana, but it almost suffocates me. Toby will catch a cold. I should have

dressed him in his rain coat, but the weather forecast was good. There's a crowd of people under the tent by the sausage stand. Toby must be somewhere. Who are they cheering on? Oh gosh, is that him standing on a table?

"Excuse me," I say. "I'm sorry, I have to pass." I can't believe it. It's really Toby. And he's not even wet. Oh dear, he sings. My Toby sings. In a fragile, high-pitched voice.

"...how the winds are laughing, they laugh with all their might. Laugh and laugh the whole day through and half the summer's night." In the background, I hear muted sound of thunder and solemn warmth settles down on me. The people sing the chorus with him and an old woman rhythmically claps her hands. I sing too. Then he sees me and starts crying.

### RAISING A BOY IN A GIRL-LOATHING WORLD

by Denise Lujan

As a feminist I wanted to believe that I didn't hold any socially constructed stereotypes in my mind about what is appropriate for a boy or girl. However, when I became a wife and mother stereotypical gender expectations were placed on me. Women are expected to perform duties like cooking and cleaning as well as have certain character traits like nurturing. If one does not perform these characteristics then one is left to feel inadequate. Issues around gender frequently come into play in parenting. Should I only dress my son in blue or green, or any socially accepted male colors? Did I have to buy him toys that were sports related, or considered more masculine? There were things that my husband and I would argue about that he would say, "he can't do that, he's a boy" or "don't put him in that he'll look like a girl." There would also be the occasional person who would ask when he was a baby, the ever-so-offensive question: "what's her name?" Why was it offensive if someone thought that my son was a girl? I still find myself grappling with all of these questions on a daily basis.

My son is only eight years old, and he too feels these pressures to perform his gender. Among his friends he has to be athletic, aggressive and not show any sign of weakness (such as crying). At times he has told me how he has been teased by other schoolmates for crying or not wanting to play a game that seemed too rough. It seems that there is a never-ending cycle that parents go through, placing unnecessary pressures on their children to behave and perform in certain ways. From dressing a child in blue or pink, buying them "boy" toys or "girl" toys and even in eating habits: it's ok for a boy to eat a lot but a girl should be selective and modest in what she eats. These socially constructed ideas are accepted and

reinforced in almost all institutions in our society: politics, healthcare, education, many religions (men and women's participation) and are greatly perpetuated by the media.

Television is a great factor in the influence of gender roles. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) the average child watches twenty hours a week or more.<sup>9</sup> This does not include hours spent on the computer or playing video games. Thanks to cable networks such as Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network children's programming is offered on a daily basis. Children, unlike adults do not channel surf. When their shows go to a commercial break, they are not quick to change the channel. They often enjoy the commercial as a means of finding out about the latest toy, breakfast cereal or video game. The commercials are very gender-based. In a commercial for the latest baby doll, girls are having fun "mothering" their baby. In contrast a commercial for a toy gun shows several boys playing a game of man hunt. These commercials seem harmless, however, they help to perpetuate a false male and female identity, by appearing as natural or normal.

My son is only eight years old, and he too feels these pressures to perform his gender.

The truth is most things we associate with boy or girl we have learned and reinforced due to societal pressures. How can we change this? We can first start by teaching our children that there isn't anything that they cannot do because of their gender. For years girls have been taught that they can become doctors and lawyers and even the President of the United States, all occupations that at one time believed could only be done by men. It's time that we allow our sons to become stay-at-home dads, nurses or daycare workers without feeling inadequate or not manly enough. Change will not happen overnight. However, for many of us that would like to think that being a "girl" isn't such a bad thing there's no better time than the present to start the wheels in motion.



<sup>9</sup> <http://www.aap.org/advocacy/reid1100.htm>

TOUGH GUISE: VIOLENCE, MEDIA  
AND THE CRISIS IN MASCULINITY  
Film Review  
by Deborah Michel

This tour de force documentary (2000) directed by Sut Jhally and narrated by social critic Jackson Katz is an original film designed for broad presentation to students; it extends feminist critiques of violent masculinity and theories of gender as socially constructed nature. Katz employs emotional intensity, certitude, and provocative factual statistics about violent masculinities. The core message that Katz conveys with such insistence concerns pathological models of masculinity in our culture that are not aberrations but are now our cultural norms; he attributes the escalating levels of violence in American society to models of masculinity embedded in domination and violence.

The first man to receive a minor in Women Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Katz is considered one of America's leading anti-sexist male activists, and is co-founder of the Mentors In Violence Prevention (MVP) program, and is widely recognized for his groundbreaking work in the field of gender violence prevention education with men and boys, especially in sports culture and the military. Katz' presentation style is believable and serious, his conviction is unshakable, and it isn't easy to ignore his unrelenting message. The film offers teaching guides to enhance its value through exercises similar to those Katz uses in his workshop series.

In the film, Katz outlines the five key elements of this program:

- Masculinity is made, not given.
- Media is the primary narrative, pedagogical force of our time.
- Media images of manhood cross distinctions of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class and play a pivotal role in making, shaping, and recycling specific attitudes about manhood.
- Examining media images of manhood and violence reveal a widespread, disturbing equation of masculinity with pathological control and violence.
- Looking critically at constructed ideals of manhood diminishes the silent power these images wield over our perceptions of us, our institutions, and each other. Tough Guise<sup>1</sup>

Katz explores in this film the relative 'invisibility' of masculine gender in our popular discourses on crime and violence of all kinds. It takes one by surprise to realize how often a news report uses language that is gender-

The time is long overdue for us to have a national conversation about the way our culture teaches boys and men – across class, race, and ethnic distinctions – to think about and act toward women. ~Sut Jhally

neutral ("kids shooting kids", "youth violence") to describe violent crimes that are committed virtually by males only. He illustrates that 85% of murders are committed by men, and that most often both victim and perpetrator are male; males are their own worst enemies. But Katz makes it clear that the real, central enemy of both women and men in society is the construction of artificial, antisocial, violent models of masculinity. He seeks to break down the assumptions that such masculinities are at all natural, and describes several alternative, healthier expressions of masculinity.

Tough Guise helps to deconstruct gender assumptions and recognize patterns of gendered violence; encourages critical thinking about gender and power, and seeks to help boys and men find more authentic, less lethal ways to express their masculine gender. It does this in a way that does not provoke defensive or negative reactions. The film and the educational program it is drawn on are culturally inclusive and respectful of the ground-breaking work of feminist projects that have come before it. The film's use of images from popular media to illustrate Katz' points are well-conceived and executed, and subtitles offering statistical data add weight to the arguments given.

Highly praised and well-received nation-wide, this documentary takes its place alongside Sut Jhally's other noteworthy films such as Dreamworlds, an indictment of the negative uses of female images in popular music videos. Tough Guise is a powerful tool for gender studies and violence prevention: it is at once an important examination of violent expressions of masculinity, of popular media's critical role in reproducing these models of masculinity, and highlights the impact these social constructions of masculine role have on our culture as a whole. Available for use in academic venues, Tough Guise has received extensive praise, and I give it the highest recommendation.

<sup>1</sup> Katz, Jonathan. Tough Guise: Violence, Media and the Crisis in Masculinity. Dir. Sut Jhally. Distributors, Media Education Foundation: *Media Gender and Diversity*.  
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## MAKE-UP YOUR GENDER

by Desiree Valdez

"Smile! It's not THAT bad, is it?" Throughout my life, men have always given me this "advice" in an incredibly condescending way that has motivated me to smile even less. Many men have projected their ideas of how a woman should behave in public on me. One of the aspects of femininity about which I was not educated seems to be smiling at everyone in my path and I have found that if I do not smile my attitude and sexual orientation are called into question by anyone who is bothered by my unsmiling face. Becoming aware of this annoying aspect of my life was the beginning of my serious questioning of gender and how I presented mine in everyday life.

As a heterosexual woman who does not always have opportunities or incentives to experiment with gender presentation, I thought the idea of seeing myself in a masculine way would be an interesting experiment. However, I did not know how to begin. Should I change my attitude? My appearance? When I have the time for it, I enjoy doing my makeup in dramatic ways. Eye shadows in vivid blues, greens, purples, pinks and shocking white and black, lipsticks and glosses that range from neutral gold to deep, dark red are what I like to use the most. I have loved changing my hair and playing with makeup since I was a little kid. Maybe I could create my masculinity through makeup.

There is no original or primary gender a drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.  
--Judith Butler

The first time I experimented with my gender in a visual way occurred by a happy accident while I was tooling around in the bathroom with my makeup case. I was in a melancholy mood and in an effort to cheer myself up, I gave myself a Dali-esque mustache. I grinned at my reflection in the mirror and as I was rubbing the black eyeliner off, I let the grayish smear of the black eyeliner stay on my upper lip. With a dark brown eyeliner pencil, I sketched in a "soul-patch" (patch of hair grown under the lower lip) and a 5 o'clock shadow. I played with my then-short hair to make it look less feminine and used some lighter brown eyeliner to make my eyes look a bit more intense. I also penciled in my eyebrows so they looked more like my brothers' bushy brow ridges than my own curvy arches. I watched myself transforming in the mirror. When I was finished with my makeover, I looked at my reflection. The person that was suddenly in the mirror scared me a bit. He looked very intense and surly. I don't think that anyone would tell this man in the mirror to smile if he was not

smiling in public. He could just be.

I looked at my reflection from different angles in the bathroom mirror. The face I had presented to the world my whole life was there somewhere, but this masculine face was a totally different facet of myself I had not seen before. I thought about the ways I would have been perceived if I had been born a man, what privileges I would have been given, what I would have had to do to maintain my masculinity. How would I have exerted my power, my sexuality, my sensitivity? It put my experiences as a woman in this culture in stark contrast.

I stared at this manufactured man in the mirror for a while and then I slowly started to wipe him away. As the face I recognized started to come forward, I realized that my body is a true canvas. I am a human being. The makeup, the clothes, the hair, and on a deeper level, the social constructions of femininity are all changeable. By playing with my gender appearance, I realized I am more complex than the patriarchal ideals of femininity that are imposed upon women in this culture. I do not have to smile because I am a woman. No matter what "advice" I am given to make other people feel comfortable with the status quo, I decide when I want to smile.

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