Professor Emerita Rose Olver, the first female faculty member to hold a tenure-track position, came to Amherst in 1962. She is now the first woman to have her portrait hung in Johnson Chapel.

She has been a ‘first’ in nearly everything. She certainly has been a pivotal and pioneering member of this community, an unflappable leaders’ leader and an inveterate door-opener for others… She represents the significance of faculty to the success of an academic institution.

-Biddy Martin

I greatly appreciate and value the statement of Amherst’s inclusion of diversity, represented by the portraits here on this east wall of Johnson Chapel. It’s such a difference from the Amherst I joined in 1962…Back then the idea of a portrait of a woman in this space was unimaginable. In fact, it seemed almost unimaginable that a woman could hold a regular faculty position.

-Rose Olver

Olver was the first woman to chair the psychology department at Amherst, and she served on the committees that guided the transition to coeducation. She also chaired the committee that created the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies.

- Emily Gold Boutilier
Comings and Goings

Rick Griffiths will be on leave for the 2013/2014 academic year.
Martha Saxton will be on leave for spring semester 2014.
Krupa Shandilya will be on leave for the 2013/2014 academic year.

New Faculty: Our newest faculty member, Sahar Sadjadi, will be joining us in the fall 2013/spring 2014 academic year. Her areas of interest include Medical Anthropology, Gender and Identity, Science Studies, Childhood, The Body, Sexuality, and Health and Inequality. Sahar studied medicine at Tehran University of Medical Sciences, worked as an emergency room physician, and received her Ph.D. in Anthropology and Sociomedical Sciences from Columbia. She will be teaching two new courses in the WAGS department: WAGS 210- Anthropology of Sexuality and WAGS 410- Gender and HIV/AIDS.

We also welcome Khary Polk who will join us in AY1314. He received his Ph.D. in American Studies from New York University in 2011. His areas of interest include masculinity, race and militarism in 20th century American history and culture.

New Course Offerings (2013-14)

WAGS 210- Anthropology of Sexuality

This course will be taught by new faculty member Sahar Sadjadi. It draws on anthropological literature to study the socio-cultural making of human sexuality and its variations, including theories of sexuality as a domain of human experience. It seeks to critically examine some of the most intimate and often taken-for-granted aspects of human life, and locate sexual acts, desires and relations in particular historical and cultural contexts. It offers analytical tools to understand and evaluate different methods and approaches to the study of human sexuality. We will examine the relation of sex to kinship/family, to reproduction, and to romance. As we read about the bodily experience of sexual pleasure, we will explore how sexual taboos, norms and morality develop in various cultures and why sex acquires explosive political dimensions during certain historical periods. We will explore the gendered and racial dimensions of human sexual experience in the context of class, nation and empire. How do class divisions produce different sexual culture? What economies of sex are involved in sex work, marriage and immigration? What has been the role of sexuality in projects of nation building and in colonial encounters? When, where, and how did sexuality become a matter of identity? In addition to a focus on contemporary ethnographic studies of sexuality in various parts of the world, we will read theoretical and historical texts that have been influential in shaping the anthropological approaches to sexuality. We will also briefly address scientific theories of sexuality.

WAGS 121- LGBT Perspectives in Music

(Offered as MUSI 121 and WAGS 121.) Taught by Mitchell B. Morris, LGBT Perspectives in Popular Music is an introduction to the ways that LGBT people and members of other sexual minorities have participated in popular music as composers, performers, and crucial audiences. In this historical survey of the recorded repertory of (mostly) American popular song, students will acquaint themselves with music in a wide range of vernacular styles and explore the social, political, and aesthetic contexts within which they have appeared. Representative figures in this respect include blues singers like Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday; composers of standards and musicals, such as Cole Porter or Stephen Sondheim; and Post-Stonewall musicians from Alix Dobkin to Rufus Wainwright. The course is designed to be welcoming to non-majors, and knowledge of musical notation and technical vocabulary is not required to enroll.
WAGS 208- Black Feminist Literary Tradition

Taught by Aneeka Henderson. Reading the work of black feminist literary theorists and black women writers, we will examine the construction of black female identity in American literature. How have black women writers negotiated race, gender, sexuality, and class in theory and in literature? What are the fissures and continuities between black feminist literary theory and black women's writing? What was the relationship between black women's literary tradition and the canon? Finally, how has that relationship changed over time? Authors will include Toni Morrison, Hazel Carby, Dorothy West, Barbara Christian, Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Hortense Spillers among others. Writing Attentive. Expectations include diligent reading, active participation, two writing projects, weekly response papers, a group presentation, and various in-class assignments.

WAGS 271- Reading Popular Culture: Girl Power

Taught by Marisa Parham. (Offered as ENGL 271, BLST 332 [US], FAMS 374, and WAGS 271.) Girl Power is the pop-culture term for what some commentators have also dubbed “postfeminism.” The 1990s saw a dramatic transformation in cultural representations of women's relationships to their own sense of power. But did this still rising phenomenon of “women who kick ass” come at a cost? Might such representations signify genuine reassessments of some of the intersections between gender, power, and the individual? Or are they, at best, superficial appropriations of what had otherwise been historically construed as male power? With such questions in mind, this class will teach students to use theoretical and primary texts to research, assess, and critique contemporary popular culture. Each student will also be trained to produce a critical multimedia project. One class meeting per week, which includes a 135-minute seminar and a 60-minute workshop and lab.

WAGS 410- Gender and HIV/AIDS

Taught by our newest faculty member, Sahar Sajadi, this seminar explores the gender dimension of the HIV epidemic in the U.S. and globally, and the role of socio-economic, political and biological factors in the shaping of the epidemic. It encourages students to think about AIDS and other diseases politically, while remaining attentive to their bodily and social effects. We will engage with AIDS on various scales, from the virus and T cells to the transnational pharmaceutical industry, and from intimate sexual relations to the political economies of health care. We will consider the processes by which some groups of people become more vulnerable to the epidemic than others, and we will read about the power dynamics involved in negotiations over condom use. Global processes that guide our investigation include the feminization of poverty, the neoliberal economic restructuring of health systems, and the politics of scientific and medical research on AIDS. In addition, the course examines the role of social movements in responding to the epidemic.
In February 2013, WAGS professor Krupa Shandilya introduced her new book at the Amherst College Spring Faculty Book Party. Here is an introduction to Krupa’s book, given by WAGS faculty member Amrita Basu: Madness of Waiting grows out of her larger scholarly interest in the depiction of women in 19th and early 20th century Indian novels. Challenging the liberal modernist depiction of women as being oppressed by religion and “tradition” she suggests that some of the women who are considered most oppressed were in fact powerful subjects who expressed their agency and eroticism through religious devotion. Drawing on her command of Hindi and Urdu, two of the six South Asian languages which she knows, Krupa is working on a book entitled Desire and Devotion: Gender and Nation in South Asian Fiction that compares depictions of Hindu widows and Muslim courtesans. Krupa has presented several chapters of her book manuscript to groups in the Valley and at national conferences. Her forthcoming book is poised to make a major contribution to the field of South Asian studies and post-colonial literature.

Madness of Waiting was published by the feminist press Zubaan in New Delhi and will soon be available in the U.S. Krupa translated the novel with a colleague and has written a wonderful introduction that places it in literary, cultural and historical context. The subject of the novel is close to Krupa’s heart. Written by a famous poet and novelist, Muhammmad Hadi Ruswa, it chronicles the story of the courtesan Umrao Jaan Ada. The story has become legendary in South Asia and is the subject of three films. Madness of Waiting reveals three important dimensions of Krupa’s scholarly commitments. The first is to reach across national and linguistic divides by collaborating in this project with a scholar in Pakistan. Second, in this as in her other work, Krupa is deeply committed to retrieving the agency of women who are at the margins of political and scholarly life. The introduction to Madness of Waiting describes her painstaking efforts to find a manuscript that most people did not believe existed. Third, Krupa is deeply immersed in popular culture and particularly in Bollywood films. In teaching with her I have seen her illuminate the ways in which these films draw on older, revered literary traditions. The Madness of Waiting will enable us to appreciate the novel that inspires three films. For all of these reasons, this is a book that you should order and read. Please join me in celebrating Krupa’s achievement.
CHELSEA TEJADA ’14

“This past fall semester I studied abroad in Beijing, China at Beijing Foreign Studies University. I was attending the IES Beijing study abroad Language Intensive program. I had four hours of Mandarin Chinese language courses each day, including one hour of one-on-one speaking and comprehension practice with a professor. Additionally, I took a course in Chinese theatre taught in Mandarin, in which I performed the Chinese modern classic play, Tea House. I also took Modern Chinese Literature taught in English, in which we tackled twentieth century China’s grappling with the country’s new gender roles, women revolutionists, and the nation’s formation of a “new woman.” My Mandarin Chinese language speaking and comprehension skills improved dramatically, especially since I lived with a home-stay family that only speaks Mandarin. By the end I could hold conversations with anyone on the street and even order off of restaurants’ menus without pointing to pictures (an incomprehensibly huge feat)! Although I lived and studied in Beijing I also had amazing opportunities to travel all around the country. I went out west to Lhasa, Tibet, where I ate a ton of Yak, visited the Dalai Lama’s Potala Palace and camped near the Nepalese border. I traveled down south to Chengdu, Sichuan, where I ate lots of spicy food and got to hug a real, live Giant Panda! I also traveled east to Shanghai, and up north to Inner Mongolia as well as China’s borders with Russia and North Korea. I absolutely fell in love with China, and especially Beijing. I’m hoping to write a WAGS thesis my senior year that will focus on a WAGS issue in China, such as China’s “leftover women” and the pressure to marry. Perhaps my research will take me back there soon.”
This past year, I have been writing about Willa Cather’s earliest portraits. In one stunning photo, taken when she was probably six, Cather –with her hair still more blond than brown and brushed back from her face, her enormous eyes, her artless but quite grave gaze at the camera, and wearing the ruffled, and well-ironed dress –is the epitome of the era’s understanding of femininity. The camera captured some part of her childhood’s potential, and even some “essence” of girlhood. One year later, however, the signals are less clear to read. She stands before a studio backdrop in a plaid dress and ankle-high shoe, with one ankle crossed over the other, as if about to leap into a dance. In her right hand is a small but not at all toy-like bow. The other hand rests on a large chair, but not in a pose that looks relaxed. There is no smile, no gaze at the camera, no fussy hair or ruffle. If the year before she offered herself to the camera with seemingly no attempt to assert her own sense of identity, in this later picture she seems nearly ready to either leap out of the picture or shoot someone. The six-year-old appeared to need no defense against what the camera might reveal; the seven-year-old has taken up both defensive and offensive positions.

And then there is the famous picture of Cather at twelve or thirteen, famous because it has been consistently used over the past five decades as the visual proof of Cather’s innate lesbianism. We know something about the context for the picture: Virginia Cather had given birth to her fifth child, a son, and was still in bed and somewhat unwell, while WC managed the house. WC asked her mother if she could get her hair cut, and permission was given. In the picture we see a severely barbered young person, perhaps male, perhaps not. She wears a mannish costume – which was perfectly in keeping with fashions of the day, even in Red Cloud. She has a shaky-looking smile on her face and stares into the middle distance. Many biographers see this photograph as revelatory of WC’s relationship with her status-conscious and fashion-loving mother, since there is no evidence that Virginia reprimanded her daughter or forbade her to continue wearing her hair cropped. I am not yet sure how I understand the photo.

The photos after this will consistently document either a short haired, straw hatted, and quite natty but gender neutral WC or, upon her entrance to the University of Nebraska Lincoln, a shirtwaisted and tie-wearing young woman who poses outdoors, hair pulled back, leaning comfortably against a boulder or a fence, legs crossed, hands in pockets, smiling fully into the camera. These were, nonetheless, professionally made portraits in some cases.

The next series of photographs, mainly professional, were taken upon WC’s graduation during her first trip to Europe, after the completion of her first Paris evening gown. WC is all velvet train and satin sleeves, with her hair styled in an upswept construction and often wearing one of the enormous hats of the period, with feather swooping up and over the top. But this is as far as I got on my last leave, at least in terms of writing. I studied books on photography, unearthed some history of various photographers, read a whole lot about women’s fashions at the time (more than twenty whalebone stays were used in the construction of the bodice of a not very fancy dress, with still more below – facts which turned out to be meaningful in thinking about the “manliness” of some of WC’s costumes). Manly? She’s corseted within an inch of her life! “Ramrod stiff as a soldier,” claims one critic? If she were not she could be impaled by her own dress. I traced out in detail WC’s history as an editor and, as much as possible, made a timeline of when she traveled where (a minimum of two trips each year for most of her life).

Of course, the real question is “So what?” What am I trying to do here?
I am using commercial photographs of WC to examine how she chose to present herself to an audience only she can imagine. I may use some vernacular photos, but probably no more than four. How does WC want to look? What is the context for the photo: her college graduation; her first big job; her first opera coat and hat—sheerly horrible. There is Cather in her office, in her study, in the salon of a famous painter, on a railroad handcar (vernacular); with family and family friends; on horseback in Arizona (vernacular); in her garden; with Dorothy Canfield Fisher; in Isabel McClung’s garden; in Isabel McClung’s father’s study. I won’t continue in this vein.

A Few Words From Our Seniors!

“The topic of my senior honors thesis in Women’s and Gender Studies is Eco Fashion and the political, social, and economic underpinnings of the global production of apparel. I investigate the human and environmental costs of the globalized fashion industry from the production to the consumption phase, and lastly, consumer usage and disposal, weaving analyses of the gendered dimensions of fashion production, from farm to factory. This approach effectively underscores the nuanced complexities of gender norms and how they are justified and normalized in the capitalist wage-labor market. My main aim is to illustrate how the exploitative practices of the global fashion industry produce gendered inequalities. Chronologically speaking, my thesis begins with the historical evolution of eco fashion and moves on to address the present meaning of sustainable and ethically produced fashion. I then consider the future of eco fashion, namely, fashion technology. Innovations and technological advancements in fashion production and consumption offer the next steps in the evolution of eco fashion. Designers are collaborating with scientists in developing new synthetic fibers, biodegradable materials, and advancing the uses of nanotechnology to create self-cleaning garments. Other innovations include photovoltaic fabrics that generate energy from the sun and 3D printing that reduces waste and may possibly circumvent the issues associated with unsustainable and unethical factory practices.

In conclusion, my thesis attempts to provide a framework that articulates why the fashion industry must change its current practices, and also illustrates how it can do so. This approach will disclose the ways in which the fashion industry can reduce its carbon footprint and foster gender equality in the capitalist wage-labor market.”- Lacie Goldberg ’13
“The eight Millenium Development Goals are markers of progress in human welfare, and are a contract between the Global North and the Global South. Through this contract, the industrialized and developing worlds have determined concrete ways to collaborate to guarantee the protection and advancement of human rights globally. The third goal of the eight goals is “to promote gender equality and empower women.” Countless studies examine the ways that women’s education is directly responsible for other achievements in human welfare. Educate a woman, educate a nation. Educate a woman, decrease child mortality. Educate a woman, increase household income. Help her help others, many scholars seem to say. However, fewer scholars have examined educating women for women’s sake. While the utilitarian value of female literacy and education is often celebrated, the intangible positive effects of education for the individual woman are largely dismissed. My thesis examines the history, impact, and challenges of women’s education in the Nigerian context — with regard to the advancement of human rights. It explores the ways in which the third MDG promotes female literacy in Nigeria — but perhaps for misguided reasons. Using qualitative interviews with women in Ikenne, Ogun State, Nigeria, it then offers new ways in which governments and NGOs might begin to reapproach the promotion of women’s education.” - Germaine Habell ‘13

“I’m writing my thesis on the contemporary poet Alice Fulton. I concentrate on her portrayal of the gender binary, including her characters’ experiences of being seen and treated as the ‘other,’ inferior sex. Fulton challenges rigid stereotypes through her use of evolutionary and quantum mechanical metaphors, which depict gender as fluid rather than a fixed and biologically essential trait.” - Claudia Wack ‘13

Women’s and Gender Studies
55 College Street
14 Grosvenor House
PO Box 5000 / Campus Box 2257
Amherst, MA 01002

Phone: 413-542-5781
FAX: 413-542-8192
Email: WAGS@amherst.edu
Editor: Amy A. Ford
Co-Editor: Phoebe B. Harris