

September 8, 2020

Dear WGSS community,

As we begin this new year full of promise and uncertainty, I want to extend a warm welcome to the new members of our community and to those who are returning. We are celebrating more than 50 years of WGSS at Rutgers, 20 years of being a department, and 20 years as a PhD program. This year has brought us challenges, difficulties and possibilities that were unimaginable fifty or 20 years ago, or even one year ago, and through it all, we have continued the crucial work of our collective project: through teaching, activism, program-building, research, writing, and providing vision, dedication and care, we have maintained and grown our intersectional feminist mission to interrogate power and work for social justice.

As I wrote in my first letter to the faculty, I come to you as a working-class Romani woman, a first-generation high-school graduate, college student and PhD. I am the only tenured Romani woman professor in the world, and I joined our department because I wanted to build this with all of you, as a project of knowledge production, teaching and activism. I have been part of this department for two decades and I have seen the deep commitments that all of us have, the hard work and brilliance that we put into our teaching, our scholarship and our service. I want to work with you, with our colleagues from other departments and with our union—to resist retrenchment and to counter the violence with a politics of love, of solidarity, of labor, of resistance and of struggle. It is only in this way that we can reconfigure the racialized, classed and gendered effects and policies that mark this moment of crisis.

We can build together, and I am asking all of you to step forward as feminists to lead, to work and to build together. As Chair, I promise you my commitment, my work and my solidarity; I ask for yours in return. Thank you for all that you have done, for all that you do, and for all that you will do. Your commitment and your work to make the world a better place despite all the uncertainty is an inspiration.

I especially want to thank our amazing WGSS staff members –Monique Gregory, Feronda Orders and Colleen Lord—who have carried the work of our department and our mission in truly heroic ways in the face of immense challenges. Their dedication, expertise, skill, long hours and cheerful demeanor have kept all of us going even when it seemed like it would not be possible to continue and to build our work when the world shut down. The staff has been working remotely, have been furloughed, and have worked harder and above and beyond during these unprecedented times, from scheduling, budgets, emergency graduate funds, technological support to faculty and students, and any other short-turnaround request from the department, school and university. They have done it with good grace and generosity. You can feel free to give them a shout-out, in person, over email and through the new SAS Staff Recognition Portal, which can be found at <https://ooa.sas.rutgers.edu/>.

Even as we begin the semester remotely, in the context of the current challenges we face, this is an exciting time for our department. We have a new name: we are officially the Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies. We have new leadership: Kyla Schuller is our Undergraduate Program Director and I am Chair and acting Graduate Program Director. I want to extend my deepest thanks and appreciation to our outgoing Chair, Mary Trigg, our outgoing Undergraduate Director, Yana Rodgers, and our outgoing Graduate Director, Jasbir Puar, for their dedicated years of service and leadership in our department –which became especially challenging these past few months. I also want to congratulate the first Chair of our Department and former Dean of Douglass, Harriet Davidson, on her retirement, and to thank her for her many decades of feminist scholarship, teaching and service to our program, our department and our university.

I am thrilled to announce that we have a new faculty colleague and a new ACLS Emerging Voices Fellow joining us this year. I want to welcome our new colleague, Asli Zengin, who joins us from Brown, where she was the Louise Lamphere Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Gender Studies in the Department of Anthropology and the Pembroke Center. Before joining Brown, Asli was a postdoctoral fellow in the Women's Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School and the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program at Brandeis University. Asli's work explores the relationship between death, sovereignty, and gendered belonging by focusing on Sunni Muslim transgender people's deaths, their funeral ceremonies, and burial and mourning practices in Turkey. Specifically, it examines how transgender deaths mark the gendered and sexual limits of belonging in regimes of Islam, family, kinship, and citizenship, and in practices of mourning and grief.

I also would like you to join me in welcoming Evelyn Autry Saavedra, who comes to us as an ACLS Emerging Voices fellow with a Ph.D. in Hispanic Studies from the University of Georgia. Evelyn has taught at Fisk University, Tennessee Tech University, Middle Tennessee State University, and the University of Georgia, and her research examines representations of indigenous female figures in cultural productions of the Peruvian Internal Armed Conflict (1980-2000). Evelyn employs decolonial approaches and testimonial literature to focus on the systematic oppression of indigenous women, indigenous feminism, trauma and memory studies, indigenous popular art, Latinx studies and testimonial literature.

We are delighted to welcome our four new Ph.D. students: Sarah-Anne Gresham, Carmen Jones, Molly McCullough and Nehal Naser; and our three new MA candidates: Carly Moore, Emily Sours, and Sadie Ronga-Rubin. Their collective interests include feminist historiography, Caribbean and decolonial feminisms, intersectionality, and gender performativity on digital social platforms, prison abolition, affect, transformative justice, critical race theory, grassroots movements, surveillance studies, transgender studies, carceral studies, the political economy of transnational adoption, and the identity formation and lived experiences of Muslim women in the contemporary United States. Their rich set of scholarly, activist and intellectual commitments demonstrate the incredible range of interdisciplinary work that takes place in our department.

We also welcome Colleen Lord to our Women's and Gender Studies community. Many of you already know Colleen, who has been doing incredible work for us in these past few months, but this is my first opportunity to officially introduce her as our newest staff member, serving as our administrative assistant and working with the undergraduate and graduate programs. I am also very happy to report that our Assistant Undergraduate Director, Ileana (Voichita) Nachescu has been promoted to Assistant Teaching Professor. Welcome and congratulations to all!

On a different note, we grieve the passing of two faculty members we lost this past Spring: Professors Cheryl Wall and Ruth Mandel, both of whom will be deeply missed and whose legacy will continue to live on across the university.

As we begin the year remotely, it looks like classes will most likely continue in a remote manner for the second semester. I also want to note that we have received more information from SAS about the budget deficit, and it looks like FY 2021 will find the university in worse financial straits than FY 2020. For the moment, senior staff (including Monique) have been furloughed, and this will most likely continue into the coming year, and, thus far, our PTL and faculty research budgets have been cut (by 20% and 50%, respectively). The research budgets are being held at 50% with the promise that the other 50% will be released once the budget crisis has been resolved; if faculty have special, urgent requests regarding research expenses, we can ask SAS for an exception. However, we are now awaiting news from SAS about our departmental budget for the coming year—they are developing a strategy for dealing with the deficit, and, as I understand, we will know more by the end of October. Finally, since we will be remote for the foreseeable future, I wanted to let you know that mail is building up in your mailboxes—including,

announcements, letters, invitations, journals and checks! In order to deal with the backlog of mail, the staff will place your mail in your offices when possible, and I suggest that you –or someone you designate—come every month to check and retrieve mail. If you are not able to do this, please let us know and we can make alternate arrangements.

Even in the midst of budget cuts and remote learning, our colleague Louisa Schein, along with Kyla, Julie and Ileana, with the support of Feronda, Colleen and Monique, developed a brilliant THREE DAYS of pedagogy workshops for our instructors. Thank you for starting us off on the right note!

On Monday, September 21, from 11:15-12:45, we will have our annual Fall welcome, which we are co-hosting with the Institute for Women’s Leadership (IWL). We are delighted that our new President Jonathan Holloway will be joining us as we celebrate the new academic year. Please join us to meet staff, faculty, and students from the other eight units that make up the IWL.

Please follow us on social media to keep up with departmental and consortium events –and please let Feronda know about any upcoming events you have planned so that she can share them on social media.

Finally, in the next week, please send Feronda and me your favorite song so that we can compile our WGSS Feminist Playlist! We will put together the playlist and circulate it over our social media channels and listen to it to keep ourselves motivated during our year of remote meeting, learning, writing, researching, teaching, activism, and, in November, voting.

Thank you, everyone, for all that you do! I look forward to continuing our work together.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Ethel Brooks', with a stylized initial 'E' and a long horizontal stroke.

Ethel Brooks
Chair and Acting Graduate Program Director