In this Issue...

Voices are the focus of this Women's Studies Newsletter... voices of Women's Studies students, describing their learning experiences abroad, their on-campus activism, and the upcoming No Limits Conference,... and, of course, the voices of faculty and staff in the program, as we begin what will undoubtedly be a powerful year for change and social justice for women on campus.

... a letter from the new director:

Dear Friends of Women's Studies!

My letter comes to you written during UNL's newly established and already much cherished Fall Break: a time to seriously catch-up with work falling to the wayside in spite of 80-100 hour workweeks. A whiny beginning instead of a rip roaring “let’s go gettem”—fanfare? Those of you remembering me from my interim year as director two years ago know better: when you start with something new, it is a good idea to “survey the land,” take stock, envision not only the next step(s) but the entire path, readjusting as you go. Late in the summer, I returned from a semester abroad in Berlin, Germany, having enjoyed the kind of intense contact and mutual growth with a group of 14 students that the university setting rarely permits. It reminded me why I entered the profession: For my love of passing on not only knowledge (anyone can download a German novel from the web these days) but the joy of investigating, interpreting and bettering our surroundings and ourselves. And believe me, it is a whole lot more fun dealing with life-hungry, smart, creative, and demanding students around you than behind a desk continually chewing and churning, and regurgitating paper, virtual or real. But, unfortunately, our program needs someone to investigate and interpret and hopefully better it as well, or else it gets plowed under. As a friend and I were watching geese flying above us at Conestoga Lake, observing how one goose led the group at the tip/point of the V they formed, but then fell back in formation and another rotated into leadership position—it seemed the perfect picture for what we do in Women’s Studies! I certainly don’t enjoy administrative tasks any more than my dear colleagues, but a task needs to be done for a good cause, and by golly, I’ll give it my best! I’ll share with you briefly how I see the lay of the land and my vision for Women’s Studies—and I invite you to comment on that, email me back, and help us all shape our common future! Building on the great leadership of our program fore-mothers and every woman involved, it has outgrown its physical location in Andrews and has moved into two grand-windowed rooms in Avery Hall (if you haven’t stopped by to see us, please do soon!!). This was not without pains, and some problems resulting from this move still need to be resolved, and we (who’s who on this year’s staff please see separate article) are diligently and creatively
“I believe my role as an artist is to build bridges. To unite us with the world and fellow beings.” Judith Ortiz Cofer

by Tina Giambastiani

Judith Ortiz Cofer will be the keynote speaker at the 1999 No Limits Conference sponsored by WSA. Cofer was born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico and moved to Patterson New Jersey where she grew up. She traveled back and forth to the island throughout her childhood. Cofer writes poetry, children’s stories, essays and novels. Her first novel The Line of the Sun won several literary awards. Her story “Nada” won the O’Henry award.

Cofer’s writing is said to “bridge two cultures.” and explore the tensions that can arise in reconciling this experience of First generation Puerto Rican families living in the United States. She writes, “When I was growing up, I breathed literature, both the spoken cuentos and books, as a creature who breathed ink. Each writer provided poems, novels; taught me that language could be tamed. I realized that I could make it perform. I had to believe the work was important to my being. To use my art as a bridge between my cultures. Unlike my parents, I was not always straddling. I began crossing the bridge, traveling back and forth with fear and confusion.”

Judith Ortiz Cofer talks about writing in English not her familial language. She does not write in Spanish but uses “Spanish words to flavor or enhance her work.” Cofer says her poems, essays and stories come out of the meditation on a word or phrase, like her story: “Nada.” “I have focused on the triggering affect a word has on my imagination, bringing not just memories but emotional associations that motivate me to look for real meaning in culture.” Cofer writes about people living in the barrios, yet she lives in Georgia. “A sense of place has been very important to my writing ... My case as a developing writer is different from others. I have always lived in relative geographical isolation from Puerto Ricans. but wherever I live, the obsession called the island has always been with me. I speak as a writer in English whose subjects often reflect the immigrant background of the writer: “I am a Latina wherever I am.” Judith Ortiz Cofer teaches literature and creative writing at the University of Georgia in Athens.
from the new director (cont.)

working on those. We have wonderful majors and minors and faculty and classes on all levels. Let's put our heads together, create the Graduate Certificate we have long dreamed about, ensure that a core program gets regularly offered and funded on hard money (not the usual temporary money, if at all), and ask Arts & Sciences for an Assistant Director to cut the director's crazy workload at least somewhat (if my adopted child ever drops out of the blue sky for me, I will need to put a nursery into AvH to keep going at this speed!). However, as I will keep pointing out, this program will only be as good as all of us who "own" a piece in it. If you don't come to our talks and classes, work on our committees, help with internships, put your hard-earned dollars where they benefit our students (Foundation account #5285), let me know your thoughts about how to make this an even better program. --I might as well pack my bags and do something more worthwhile; we all get caught up in our home departments, our jobs and our immediate classes thinking, 'oh, WS is just doing fine without me for a while'. Don't bet on it. You turn around and it might be wiped out. Gone. It only takes a short phase of neglect to do damage you would need a decade and longer to rebuild.

We need to stay in touch at the very least and keep nurturing it even with the smallest actions we can afford...We stay in touch wonderfully through our WS General Meetings, WSA meetings, committee-work and (come spring'99) another colloquium series, but I would like to do two more things: institute a WS-Majors/Minors' Roundtable, held every third Monday, in the director's office (AvH 308), beginning November 16th, and institute a Women's Studies Faculty Research Roundtable, every third Thursday of the month, beginning Nov. 19, 3 pm in the City Union near Starbucks.

So let me close with the promised fanfare: We are strong, exuberant folks in a program exploding at the seams and therefore spreading bits and pieces into hitherto unreached comers of campus and beyond, affecting change and growth for us and our surroundings. A lot needs to be done, but gee, are we ever ready to do it all together!!!

Christina

---

El Olvido

(segun Las madres)
By Judith Ortiz Cofer

It is a dangerous thing
To forget the climate of
your birthplace; to choke out
The voices of the dead relatives
when
In dreams they call you by
Your secret name; dangerous
To spurn the clothes you were
born to wear for the sake of
fashion;
to use weapons and sharp instru­
ments you
are not familiar with; dangerous
to disdain the plaster saints
before
which your mother kneels praying
for you with
embarrassing fervor that you
survive in
the place you have chosen to live; a
costly,
bare and elegant room with no
pictures
on the walls: a forgetting place
where
she fears you might die of expo­
sure.
Jesus, Maria y Jose.
El Olvido is a dangerous thing.

---

No Limits is an annual conference dedicated to crossing boundaries between disciplines and exploring a wide range of issues. We invite proposals from undergraduate and graduate students on any topic and from any discipline related to women's issues, lives, and culture. Creative writing, Visual arts, film, music, performance and academic papers are welcome. The Conference is free and open to the public.

Please submit one 500 word abstract outlining your proposed paper, workshop, creative reading, film, or project by Monday, December 7, 1998 to:

No Limits Conference
c/o Women's Studies Program
University of Nebraska, Lincoln
307 Avery Hall
Lincoln, NE 68588-0136
An internship in Germany ....

In March of 1997, I called Christina Brantner to ask her if she had any ideas about an internship relating to Women's Studies for me. "Well, sure!" she said. I decided that day that I was going to go to Berlin. It took about 20 minutes for her to convince me that it was no problem that I didn't know any German. It was the most impulsive decision I have ever made, and it was also the most gratifying. I had nine months to psyche myself up about it, then on January 1, 1998 at 8:00 in the morning, I began a segment of my life that taught me more than I possibly could have imagined on that freezing Nebraska morning. I was terrified, thrilled, upset, excited, nervous, and absolutely had no idea what the future held, and we always know that anything is possible, but leaving here to go there made the possible anything take on a new dimension for me. I had bought a conversational German set of tapes and books a month before, I believe in an effort to lessen my feelings of guilt and fear of going to a place where I could not communicate. Only, I didn't have the time to listen to them before I left, so I resolved to learn German on the 9 hour overseas flight. That did not work. (I couldn't concentrate because I was sure the plane would crash.) But the 15 weeks of intense German classes in Berlin did. I lived the language in order to get 20 hours worth of German learned before the end of April.

In April, I started working as an intern at EWA Frauenzentrum e. v. (Erster Weiblicher Aufbruch, or First Women's Uprising, Women's Center). EWA was founded only five months after the fall of the Berlin Wall in a district in the former eastern sector of the city.

...to find out more about how you can plan an internship abroad contact the Women's Studies Program.

It was organized to address the new and challenging issues facing primarily East German women as a result of the Wende (literally, change, the Wende refers to the time period between the fall of the Wall on November 9, 1989 and the first free, all German elections in March of 1990). Some of these issues include massive unemployment among all former East Germans disproportionately affecting eastern women, loss of relative economic self-sufficiency, loss of free childcare, the imposition of the conservative West German virtual ban on abortion, and the daily struggle of adaptation to living in a westernized societal system. These losses still profoundly affect East German women. Within the western system though, they have been able to organize freely and create innovative grassroots agencies and networks not possible prior to Wende.

Despite social provisions of the GDR, women in the East lived in a system of patriarchy characterized by double burdens and glass ceilings and have since had to switch over into another patriarchal structure, that of their western sisters. East and West German women have different views about what oppression is and what feminism is and is not to them. These beliefs have structured their respective activist projects and centers. Eastern centers have a very comprehensive structure, whereas western centers are more specialized, focusing on fewer issues under one roof. EWA houses a cafe and bar, a library, archive, video and audio recording and editing studios, a photography lab, a computer lab, a classroom, a studio for dance and yoga, and a jewelry workroom. They offer courses in English, Spanish, French, Italian, self-defense (for girls and women), dance-psychotherapy, yoga, bellydancing, and computer skills (for girls and
by Gretchen Obrist

women). They offer services through a staff attorney and a psychologist. Social counseling for issues concerning pregnancy, housing, employment, resources and services is available, as is a career planning and continuing education service. EWA hosts disco parties on Saturday nights and a lecture series during the week. The cafe doubles as a gallery exhibiting artwork by local women and their stage is used for poetry readings and musical performances. Just being in this environment for three months allowed me to get to know many women with incredible strength and both heartbreaking and refreshing stories. The diverse group of patrons and staff taught me a lot about themselves and their vision of change. I learned how they operate on very limited government funds and how they have structured their organization. I even did a presentation at EWA on my ideas of feminism as an American woman. I used my new language and rode on my nerve-high and support from Christina.

I lived with an incredible West German family. Gabi was the first woman to become a horseback police officer in West Berlin after demanding a position against claims that it simply wasn’t possible because there were no toilets, showers, or uniforms for women. She and her husband and two sons were instrumental in my language process, and Gabi became my confidant and dear friend. She and her friends gave me west German perspectives. I went to school and worked in the former East. I lived in one of the most dynamic and historically profound cities in the world with people who had seen revolutions of many kinds. During my internship, I did independent study research on German women and their sociopolitical situations before and after the Wende and received first hand accounts of the circumstances of their lives and how they have changed. East and West German women have a lot to learn from each other, and we as American women can learn from them both. Removed from home, I was able to critique the American system from a different perspective. During my time in Berlin, I worked to identify and analyze my western, and further, American bias. Prior to this first experience of being a complete foreigner and speaking a language not my own, I was only vaguely aware of this pervasive aspect of myself. Immersion into another culture forced me to look at my own culturally formed identity. My American identity is comprised of my experiences in this country. I grew up in its language. I study in the American University system. I grew up with American-style capitalism. I have been told about the world from a certain perspective. In addition to these American factors, I have my personal experiences, including my status of having grown up in a white middle class family in a Midwestern city of just over 200,000.

I knew all this before I went to Berlin, but only when I was there did I feel it. I felt it through how people related to me, what they said to me, what they didn’t say to me and through German cultural commentary on the United States. I borrowed a book from Christina while we were in Berlin, and ran across a statement in it that hit home. Susan Friedman refers to her first experience outside the United States saying, “I came to learn that some aspects of myself were actually American, when I thought they were just natural” (Jankowsky, Karen & Carla Love. Other Germans--Questioning Identity in Women’s Literature and Art. 1997. New York: State University of New York Press. p.277). My identity as a feminist and as a woman has its context not only within my ethnic and class position, but also within western, American culture. I had to define for myself a national identity, a racial identity, a western identity, and only after doing so could I proceed with understanding and processing the experiences, feminisms, priorities, and identities of German women of East and West origin. Only with
Xilitla, Tepotzlan, Amealco, Jalpan, Morelia and Zijuataneco. What are these strange words? They are just a few of the names of places I visited while studying in Mexico. In January, I went to Queretaro, Mexico to study at the TEC de Monterrey. It was actually my second time as an exchange student in Mexico. I had studied there in a six week summer program in 1996. I loved it so much I had to return. This time I lived there for six months. It was tough in the beginning, being so far from home and family and in a country so different from my own, but after a time, I did not want to leave. This was a wonderfully challenging, positive growing experience. There is so much to see and do in Mexico, six months was not long enough. I intend to move there some day.

As a nontraditional college under grad, I was definitely a minority in this program. Most of my peers were about 15 years younger than me. However, this was an exceptional group of young people. I became friends with some of the most intelligent, mature and These friendships are among the creative people I had ever met. Those friendships are among the most important ones in my life. From the very beginning there was something special about this group. We came together because of our common interest in learning Spanish and we all shared the learning about the people and the culture of Mexico. We hooked up with a group of Mexican students who were gracious hosts, guides and as eager to know us as we were to know them. We became an instant family.

Together, we took many trips to various parts of Mexico. It is relatively easy and affordable to travel through Mexico by bus and we wanted to see as much as we could. We visited secluded beaches, remote islands, small villages and old romantic cities. We traveled through the Sierra Madres to see the Monarch Butterflies before their trek north to Canada, and we visited museums and ruins in Mexico City. We camped under palapas on a beach called “Michigan”, walked down the narrow cobblestone streets of Guanajuato, ate coconuts on an island called Manzanilla, and we hiked through the jungle of Xilitla. These were the most beautiful places I had ever seen. I often had to pinch myself to be sure I was not dreaming. It was an extraordinary experience.

Mexico has a very rich blend of Indian and Spanish cultures. Many folks have traditional values, a strong faith, deep spirituality, and sincere regard for family. Here in the States we might hear about “machismo,” superstitions, or the poverty in Mexico. However, my experience of these stereotypes are not at all representative of the diversity that exists in the people and the culture of Mexico. There are many men who do not fit the “macho” stereotype, and there is a growing feminist movement. My teachers were among these feminists. They are mothers, some are single, and all are breaking traditions, questioning restrictions imposed by the Catholic Church, and fighting against a patriarchal culture.

I had the opportunity to teach in English in a progressive school, that provided free classes to children of students and teachers. Fathers and grandfathers as well as mothers and grandmothers brought their kids to and from school. What I noticed was a real sense of community among these folks; they were always gracious and kind.

I met artists and writers. I got my first tattoo. I went to a spiritual healer who gave me a massage that helped me through a difficult time. I saw a side of Mexico and her people no one had told me about. I met wild, wonderful women and I also fell in love. There is so much more I could say about my experience there. I encourage anyone who has never been – GO! If you have gone GO BACK! Mexico is truly magical!
... an internship in Germany (cont.)

these personal frames of reference clearly defined can feminists begin to grasp what women experience in spheres other than their own on any level. In Berlin, I began to solidify for myself my place in a global community of women. The Deutsch in Deutschland (German in Germany) program is organized through the University of Nebraska and usually entails 12-16 weeks at the d.i.d. language institute in Berlin and then either an internship or university classes there. If you want to knock out your language requirements in a few months, and more importantly, gain an incredible international experience with an internship, I encourage you to consider this option seriously and talk to Christina Brantner or me. We would love to answer any of your questions. The plane leaves in January so there is still time to sign up. (And it doesn’t matter whether or not you can speak German.)

Tina & Toni’s Wedding

On October 12, 1998, I married a woman that I had met only the day before ... well, sort of. If you have kept up with the media coverage concerning same-gendered marriages, you are aware that same-gendered marriages are not legal in the United States—[an excellent reason to stage a mock wedding performance art piece in the Student Union Crib, as Sherri Joyner of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered (GLBT) Resource Center did. The importance of being in a public place as lesbians making a commitment to one another--marriage being a basic right that everyone should have--was one of the key issues. Also, October is National Lesbian & Gay History Month.]

The event was dedicated to the memory of Matthew Shepard, a gay man in Wyoming, who died the morning after being brutally beaten. Another of the major issues involved in the wedding was, as Sherri Joiner said during the ceremony, “We want this piece to be a testament to the Lesbian/Gay struggle for equality—a ceremony that indicates that despite all the pain we have endured and all the tears we have shed, not only are we still able to fight for our freedom, but we are able to have fun while doing it!”

Speaking as an insider of the ceremony, I can say that it was a great deal of fun. At the same time, though, we discussed beforehand the possibility of counter-demonstrations and general bigotry. We were all quite relieved when the audience responded positively to this statement made by Sherri: “Friends, family and guests, I ask you if you are willing to support these two couples, if you are willing to honor their relationship as a marriage and to treat same-gender unions with the dignity accorded to all civilly recognized marriages in our society? If you are willing, say ‘I do.’ Channel 8 News was present at the performance to cover the story. To be honest, I am a big ham and loved being on camera, so that was a personal thrill for me as I watched the five-o’clock news.

As for my new partner, I saw her for the first time since the wedding the other day in passing. I’ve been asked often since the ceremony, “How’s married life treating you?” Well, for me, the performance symbolized something deeper than I can explain. It was a commitment to The Divine Female and to the public world as a supporter of Lesbian and Gay rights.

Amanda Lighter

Marriage Benefits

- Insurance benefits through a spouse's employer
- Insurance discounts offered to married couples and related persons living in same household
- Government benefits such as Social Security and Medicare
- Veterans military benefits offered to spouses (education, medical care, housing loans)
- Income tax deductions, credits and exemptions
- Immigration of foreign partners
- Witness and court testimony rights
- Continuation of lease rights (renewal of lease)
- Community property rights
- Inheritance rights

From C. Ann Shepard. (http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/1348)
Be a Friend to the Women's Studies Program!

Your generous contributions to the UNL Women's Studies Program help make possible a variety of activities and projects that benefit women on campus. Even small gifts make a real difference!

Yes, I would like to support the teaching, research, and service activities of the UNL Women's Studies Program. Enclosed is my gift of (please circle amount):

$1,000 $250 $100 $50 $35 other ______

Please make checks payable to the University of Nebraska Foundation and specify account #5285: Women's Studies Development Fund.

The Women's Studies Program
University of Nebraska, Lincoln
307 Avery Hall
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588-0136
402-472-9392