"I’m a wildwood flower waving for you; I’m a broadcasting tower, waving for you": An Interview with Patti Parlette

On March 9th, Austin Heffernan met with Patricia (Patti) Parlette, the founder and creator of the Kristie Ann Wood Endowment Scholarship, to discuss the project’s origins, her personal friendship with Kristie Wood, and the 100k donation to WGSS that resulted from her efforts. Patti works as an Administrative Coordinator in the Literature, Cultures, and Languages Department at UConn. She also serves as a self-proclaimed expert in “Joni-ology,” an homage to The Great singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell, in order to, as Patti comically expressed, do her part in “humanity’s education.” During the interview, Patti’s kindness, warmth, and compassion shone through her words as she expressed her connection to Kristie and her passion for the scholarship. The following dialog is a collection of Patti’s thoughts and memories which she hopes will be passed on to readers and will help to continue Kristie’s enduring legacy.

Austin: The goal here today is to talk about the Kristie Ann Wood Endowment Scholarship and the $100k donation to WGSS. We hope to make people excited about WGSS and to be encouraged to donate. To start, I just wanted to ask a broad question and see where your thought process goes. How did this all start and how did you get involved in the project?

Patti: Kristie was a very dear friend of mine, one the best friends I’ve ever had. She was a brilliant woman and a role model. She passed away at a very young age, leaving a husband, three little boys, and her two loving parents. On the anniversary of her birthday, I was thinking about her, as I do every year. I remembered that she was the first person to ever major in Women’s Studies at UConn. She was a pioneer. She did it as an individualized major by asking a professor at Yale University to write a letter in support of her proposed plan of study. All of a sudden I thought, “I know how to memorialize her and keep her name out there forever—perhaps even help students. What about a scholarship?” I had started another scholarship here for our department head who retired (The David K. Herzberger Study Abroad Scholarship) and in the

Kristie’s loss was heartbreaking. She had so much to give to the world—not just to her three kids, her husband, and her parents, but to everybody.
Letter from the Editor

To the WGSS community,

The creation of this newsletter has been a journey filled with anxiety and joy, but a journey that was extremely rewarding to take. For the past month, I have been collaborating with students and professors to obtain personal and meaningful materials, bombarding people with email reminders about deadlines, receiving heaps of emails filled with content, editing people’s submissions, writing bios, descriptions, and other articles, and communicating with the graphic designer. I don’t mean to list these things to complain or because I’m looking for recognition, I list these things to show you how much teamwork, communication, and effort that goes into generating a product that captures the many components of WGSS.

I would like to extend special thanks to Maxine Marcy, who graphically designed the entire newsletter and ensured that it would fulfill our goals, to Sherry Zane, who encouraged students to submit their work and has submitted several pieces herself, to Franklin Canales, who vectorized the new and improved newsletter logo that I designed, to Coleen Spurlock, who reached out to several alumni and assisted me with announcements, to Bola Akanji, who submitted multiple works, and to Patricia Parlette for her amazing interview. I would also like to thank everyone who submitted content: Mike Stankiewicz Jr., Shaylyn Young, Feifei Luo, Haley Brennan, Emily Napear, Tyla Potvin, Enri Duka, Julia Kennedy, Stephen Hnatuk, Diana Gryszkiewicz, Silvi Isaku, Laura Mauldin, Emma Welton, Jonathon Judd, Marissa Dubeky, Triota, and Victoria Kallsen.

Truly this newsletter would not have been possible without all of you! This process has shown me how united we are on the WGSS front and I wish everyone the best from the bottom of my heart.

Happily and Humbly,

Austin Heffernan

Emma is a second semester exchange student from the University of Warwick, UK. She totally “digs” WGSS classes and has taken three in her time here, but doesn’t really want to leave UConn. She recommends Comedy Central’s Broad City for “dope” representations of gender in popular culture, and also because it’s hilarious.

Emma Welton, United Kingdom (continued from page 1)

thing to contribute, and that is a complete testament to Sherry’s vivacity and enthusiasm as a professor. We all began seeing more and more how intricately (and frustratingly) structured, our society here is around performing gender and performing it “right.” This realisation for so many of us contributed to our class sharing enormously with one another – from the broad experiences, to the intimately personal – and we grew enormously as a class.

Sherry encouraged us to be creative in a way I hadn’t experienced with many other professors at UConn. She allowed us to be unrestricted in our expressions of ourselves, which I found to be most encouraging in the body mapping project. With mine, I dip-dyed tampons in blue and red ink – blue to show the false, empty and inaccurate representations of women (in tampon and pad commercials they show this weird transparent/ethereal blue liquid to represent blood – what’s up with that?), and then the red to represent the true, holistic and meaningful representations of women. Then, I attached quotes from film, literature, poetry etc., corresponding with whether they were true representations of women specifically, or if they perpetuated damaging stereotypes. I feel like other professors might have been a bit weirded out by this project in other departments and programs, but Sherry totally embraced it. This, once again, is a true testament to her liberalism and open-mindedness as a professor.

Personally, I found the adjustment coming to UConn from the UK enormously challenging; to be honest, I really didn’t like it here. I’m trying not to be cheesy here, but it’s literally true: one of the reasons I stayed was because of my WGSS class. To have a class that tackled issues so enormously diverse in an unrestrained way was exactly what I wanted to experience from America, and I got that. Sherry has been completely inspiring in her energy as a professor, and her true kindness and generosity as a woman. Her qualities and her class made my adjustment to US college life easier.

Check out WGSS on Facebook for latest updates, events, and news.
Patti Parlette (continued from page 1)

process came to realize that if you put a good cause and a good person together, you can raise a lot of money. As the wheels started turning, I talked to an old friend who, right away, offered to contribute $2000 dollars, a most generous gift, but still short of the amount necessary for an endowed scholarship to generate interest. So I contacted Kristie’s husband, Chris Flischer, who put me in contact with her wonderful parents and they immediately loved the idea! In fact, they had been saving money to do something in Kristie’s name that would recognize her commitment to social justice, human rights, the environment, and women’s rights. They immediately donated $8000. So, there we were, at $10,000.

Austin: Wow, $10,000 is a lot of money, especially when you consider that her parents contributed $8000 of it! The fact that they were saving all of that money for her, even after her death, shows that they must have really loved her. As you said, “There we were, at $10,000,” but how did that amount climb to $100,000?

Patti: The $10,000 was donated about 4 years ago, but shortly after, the Women’s Studies program invited me to their end-of-the-year party. It was right around that time that Kristie’s parents, the Woods, signed a promise that they would donate $100,000 within five years! I was shocked! To me, that’s huge! I’m really proud of this.

Austin: You should be proud! What an accomplishment! That kind of money can really make a difference in people’s lives and it already has. Do you remember the first person to receive some of the money?

Patti: Marissa Dubecky was the first recipient. She is so much like Kristie and she’s really carrying her torch. She recently wrote a great article for bustle.com: “12 Books For Young People That Will Turn You Into A Feminist At Any Age.”

Austin: What a gratifying moment to see that Kristie is still continuing to help others. Are you a donor yourself?

Patti: (smiles) Yes. UConn has a program called “Close to Home” and employees can give money out of their paychecks. I think that when we look at our paystubs, most of us see this tax and that tax, and this fee and that fee, and we don’t like it. But the donation from my paycheck is the one thing that always makes me smile. I contribute $10 bi-weekly to two different funds: Kristie’s, and another that honors my favorite French professor emeritus, Gene J. Barberet. It makes me feel good because it helps students with scholarship money and the recipients get a spiritual boost. Since the award lets students know that what they are doing is important and that somebody else thinks so too, it encourages them to keep going and forge ahead.

Austin: I think so too. It shows that they matter and that they can accomplish their goals because they are not alone. The next question I have is, and you touched upon this a bit already, but why donate to WGSS? For somebody who didn’t know Kristie or for someone who isn’t as connected to WGSS, what do you have to say to people who want to put their money somewhere?

Patti: WGSS is a relatively new program and somewhat underfunded. Whereas some fields can count on the contribution of corporations, I doubt that this is the case for Women’s Studies. So, every little bit counts: $10, $20, $50… slow and steady wins the race. Even smaller amounts, like $5 a paycheck, can make a difference, since many people can afford that. To give money to help a student, especially with the cost of education going up, is a wonderful thing. There is no better investment than investing in the education of our ‘kids.’

Austin: Yea! Like you said, because the program is so new, parents can really help the future of their kids and other kids by donating. I mean, when you have a department that continues to grow, the department does things for their alumni. That department is able to give you connections and they help you to network.

Patti: …And it also sends a message to the university’s internal and external constituents: “Look at all of the people who believe in our WGSS program.” In this sense, money does talk.

Austin: It does! I mean, college is a business of making money. Quite frankly, the departments who have money on campus are the ones who get to have more of a say and get even more financial support.

Patti: We live in a complex world and there are many priorities. In the scheme of things, WGSS is a small program, perhaps a bit of an underdog…

Austin: They’re a rising dog!

Patti: Yea, ok (laughs)! A rising dog… or a rising Husky!

Austin: Speaking of WGSS, have you had experience in it yourself?

Patti: I never took a course because it wasn’t around when I was a student, but I like to think that my friend Kristie ‘invented it.’ I remember that when she was working on her plan of study, everybody was teasing her: “Women’s Studies? What is that?” It didn’t exist! She invented it for herself.

Austin: I’m glad that she invented it, or I wouldn’t be where I am right now… WGSS has changed my life…

Patti: Kristie’s loss was heartbreaking. She had so much to give to the world—not just to her three kids, her husband, and her parents, but to everybody.

Austin: That’s a loss that you must face every day. They say that people are able to get over loss and that you have a certain amount of time to grieve and then you have to move on…

Patti Parlette (continued on page 4)
Patti Parlette (continued from page 4)

Patti: You don’t get over it, you get through it.

Austin: Exactly! You remember and you do things with that memory. You commemorate that person and you share their legacy with other people.

Patti: Over the years, I have learned that when we lose someone who is really important to us, we have to keep them alive somehow. And that’s how this scholarship started. Now people know and remember her name.

Austin: Can you tell me more about Kristie?

Patti: We went to high school together and she was a year older than me. We were on the student council together. She always had her hand raised and had something insightful to say. And I was really thrilled and honored to be her friend because I looked up to her. She was so smart! She had come to UConn a year before me and I used to visit her all the time. During sophomore year, we became housemates in Ashford. We remained very close and she was a bridesmaid of mine. Kristie was a beautiful person. I tease her husband that he was the lucky one because he was able to win her heart. Have you ever seen a picture of her?

Austin: (surprised) Actually, no, I haven’t.

Patti: She was tiny, but a bundle of energy. She was a cheerleader and a political activist. She taught me a great deal and I still miss her. When something comes up and there’s a decision that I have to make, I wish I could talk to her and hear her words of wisdom. At her memorial service, they passed around the microphone, but I was too overcome to say anything. Later at the reception, I saw her mother and I told her that I had things to say. Her mother replied, “Oh you should have…” And now, whenever I have something to say, I say it because of that experience. Even in death, she taught me something.

Austin: She sounds very genuine and very kind. I definitely think that this scholarship is a way to keep her name and her energy alive. I think the people who receive her award are constantly receiving that energy from her. I wanted to thank you for sharing your experience and for reliving that loss because I could tell that you were getting emotional and I know that it’s difficult.

Patti: Of course… I would do anything for Kristie. (pause) I still wish I had taken the microphone and said something…

Austin: I think, although you never took the microphone at that time, you are taking the microphone right now.

Patti: Exactly! Exactly!

Austin: That’s really powerful. You are speaking, not only for the memorial service, but for all the future majors, minors, donors, people who are curious about Kristie, about the endowment…

Patti: (smiles) Thank you for putting it that way! Have you ever heard of Joni Mitchell? I use her lyrics all of the time, as if they were a language. A line in one of her songs says, “I’m a wildwood flower, waving for you; I’m a broadcasting tower, waving for you.” And that’s how I feel right now: I’m a broadcasting tower waving for Kristie.

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The WGSS Experience

WGSS: An Absolute Necessity of Necessities

Spending time within a WGSS course allows for a sense of personal advancement and enlightenment otherwise unattainable on a campus with a social sphere that is largely heteronormative and aggressive in its sports culture fanaticism. The courses that I have taken have been heavily supportive of a more expansive look at gender and sexuality, as well as the power structures that shape public perceptions about them. Having and maintaining these courses is so significant because it keeps the careful balance between identities in place by elevating marginalized genders, sexualities, and lifestyles, while diminishing negative, offensive, and even bigoted views. I have found multiple components of the courses to be supportive of this enlightened and expansive view, which actively weighs against the clear and present heteronormative forces on campus.

Just to take a brief dip into the experiences that I have gained from taking WGSS courses at UConn, I will provide a scenario from Gender and American Pop Culture. In addressing the subject of the phallus as a symbol of male potency and domination, a pervasive sign of power in pop-culture, the room fell silent. The instructor deftly shifted through the material and challenged students to react to this topic, to confront the overt displays of masculine power, and to notice hegemony within our own popular culture. Furthermore, the instructor also highlighted the ways that the phallus as symbol can actually constrain and restrict the male subject from expressing himself on a level not compatible with a rigidly masculine persona. Thus, the subject of the phallus is broached and the students became suddenly aware of the ways gender and sexuality can also be encoded into the symbolic exchanges we engage in every day. From my experience, this kind of realization and transformation characterizes the uniqueness of WGSS courses and can be seen in any WGSS classroom.

Jonathan (continued on page 5)
Overall, WGSS provides a platform for exploration of self and other, which is crucial for tracing a new and exciting historical moment wherein this exploration is an absolute necessity. As boundaries and barriers are broken down against self-expression and general presentations of self, we find that those all around us are differing and questioning their orientation to the set binaries of male/female gender and sexuality. Of course, it is essential, then, to have on hand and in action, a set of academics and courses that are geared towards addressing the ever expanding field of study on women, gender and sexuality. What I have seen in these courses, which gives me the most confidence in their necessity, is young men and women able to gain insight on and directly confront their own misconceptions and bigotries toward alternative and marginalized genders and sexualities.

**The WGSS**

**BIO - JONATHAN**

Jonathan Judd is a recent graduate from UConn’s School of Fine Arts. He majored in Art History, but took a number of WGSS courses that enriched his historical art research and overall approach to academia. Currently, he teaches history at the middle school level, but will be returning to graduate school in order to pursue further historical study with a focus on gender and sexuality in the mid-twentieth century or the Cold War era.

“I have found multiple components of the courses to be supportive of this enlightened and expansive view, which actively weighs against the clear and present heteronormative forces on campus.”

Jonathan Judd

**The WGSS**

**BIO - MARISSA**

Marissa Dubecky was a WGSS major and the first recipient of the Kristie Ann Wood Endowment. Since her graduation, she has been working a part-time finance job and also interning at BUST Magazine in New York City, where she channels feminism into her writing. To check out a compilation of her latest articles visit: http://bust.com/marissa-dubecky/

**The Fuel that Burns the Fire: Marissa Dubecky’s Life Since WGSS at UConn**

Discovering Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies in college was transformative for me. I knew from my first class, taught by Barb Gurr, that I’d pursue a major. As I continued through the program, WGSS gave me passion and direction. I was incredibly honored to be awarded the inaugural Kristie Ann Wood scholarship upon leaving UConn. Whenever I think about it, I feel motivated to work harder and not forget what is important to me. Since my graduation, I have acted as an advocate and community educator at a domestic violence/sexual assault crisis center. It was an unforgettable and eye-opening experience that reinforced in me the importance of feminism’s goals to our society. I hope to empower women and spread feminism’s messages for social justice. My work will always be guided by my education as well as the inspiring people in the WGSS department who shaped me during my years at UConn. I will be forever grateful for that.

**WGSS 2014 Scholarship Awards**

**FEMINIST ART AWARD — $250**
Martina Powell, WGSS/AfAm Major—Jr year,
(2 poems and cover)

**J. BROWN-DICKSTEIN — $2,000 each**
Martina Powell, WGSS Major—Jr year
Abdullah Hasan
Giorgina Paiella

**TEACHING AWARD — $250**
Julie Shoults

**CHASE GOING WOODHOUSE — $250**
Lauren Todd, WGSS/SPAN Major, Film Studies Minor--Sr graduating in May

**SUSAN PORTER BENSON — $250**
Kristina Reardon (2 essay/2 covers)

**KRISTIE ANN WOOD ENDOWMENT — $2,119**
Giorgina Paiella

**GLADYS TANTAQUIDGEON — $250**
Martina Powell
We’re Not Newbies Anymore

WGSS 1105, “Gender and Sexuality in Everyday Life,” is a core, introductory course for many of our students at UConn. Often, it is the first course in WGSS that students will take in their undergraduate careers, yet it is so powerful that it propels many students further into WGSS or into other socially conscious, vocational directions. Bola Akanji, a current adjunct professor in this course, tasks her students to reflect on what they have learned midway through the course. Presented here is a compilation of their responses and just a small preview of what WGSS students will learn as they progress in their course material.

Tyla Potvin, Declared Female; WGSS 1105, Fall 2014

This course and my other WGSS course, have, by my own definition, enlightened me. People of color, women of all races, disabled individuals, and transgender individuals have faced the most vicious hardships of inequality, violence, and discrimination through the power struggle of a white, patriarchal society. I am definitely feeling much different lately. I have joined UCONN’s NOW chapter (National Organization for Women) and I have also joined RAR (Revolution against Rape) here on campus. These groups are a great way to reach out to other women and men like me, who have newly found feminism. I couldn’t be more proud to label myself as a feminist. I am interested in minoring in Women’s Studies because of this course. I am also hoping to do an internship this spring with the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women here in Connecticut.

Stephen Hnatuk, Declared male, WGSS 1105, Fall 2014

Coming into the semester I didn’t know what feminism was. I only knew it was something that many people didn’t like. Many of the things I had previously heard about feminism were actually myths and I consider myself a feminist now. I’ve learned a lot about how gender affects my daily life. I never thought that gender could have such a large impact on the way society has shaped me as an individual and how it affects society as a whole. As a man, I took a lot away from the fact that feminism is not just a women’s issue. It is as much a man’s responsibility to promote women’s equality as it is a woman’s.

[Name omitted], Declared Transgender, WGSS 1105, Spring 2014

A lot of the course’s material has been things that I have learned from personal experience, being a mentally ill and transgender student. That said, a lot of the learning I have done is regarding my classmates’ opinions and commentary, along with how gender affects different areas of the world. It has been enlightening and eye opening to learn about indigenous non-binary genders, and has given me more perspective on what it is like to be part of a global transgender community.

THE DONATION STATION

Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies is a relatively new program that emerged in 1974 as a response to the growing social awareness of oppression that existed, and continues to exist, in society. More than ever, in a time of growing class disparities, gender/sexual subjugation and invisibility, institutionalized racism, and the expansion of global militarism, students need the education to preserve their own rights and to “make waves” for change. However, we need your help to accomplish this goal! By donating to WGSS, you are helping to facilitate the development of future activists who are committed to ensuring equality, peace, and justice for all. Your donation will help to finance student scholarships, sponsored events, and further WGSS promotion. Follow the simple steps below and get started in making a long-lasting impact:

1. Visit: https://secure3.convio.net/ucfdn/site/Donation2?1380.donation=form1&df_id=1380
2. Select “Other gift designation not listed above”
3. Under “Gift Designation,” type “Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies”
4. Enter all relevant information
5. Click “Next”
6. Enter Donor Information
7. Click “Next”
8. Review and Process

Making Waves for Change
Who Needs Feminism?

“Who Needs Feminism?” is an internet photo campaign, sponsored by UConn NOW, SURJ, and TRIOTA, designed to tell everyone why we ALL need feminism! Although these particular photos were not taken recently, the project is ongoing and these students had critical things to say that we wanted to share.
Bethany Stevens Challenges UConn Students to Rethink Sex and Disability
By Laura Mauldin

During the fall semester, more than forty faculty, graduate students and undergraduates from all over the university attended a very lively and special talk given by Bethany Stevens. Stevens is an Atlanta-based lawyer, activist, sexologist, and disability consultant. Her work has been published in several peer-reviewed venues including the American Bar Association Human Rights Magazine, Disability Studies Quarterly, UNICEF’s Annual Report, and the Center of Women Policy Studies. But more than just an accomplished scholar, she is a passionate lecturer and workshop facilitator – having given invited talks all over the world. She focuses on issues related to sexual health of people with disabilities. As part of the WGSS Symposia series, she gave a lecture and workshop titled “The Politics and Pleasures of Cripsex.” The event garnered an enthusiastic and enthralled response. As she lectured, students and faculty alike asked questions – often ones that they might have been afraid to ask in any other context – and participated in the discussion. During the talk, Bethany argued that the root of much of the continued sexual health disparities and silence around sexuality of people with disabilities is rooted in the power structure of ableism – which simultaneously devalues people with disabilities and exalts “normalcy.” In this important event, feminist issues and disability studies were brought together for a truly enriching event. WGSS is excited to continue bringing together these fields for more events in the future. You can follow Bethany’s work on her blog, cripconfessions.com, and on Twitter @ disaBethany.

We Are Not Just One Thing: Crenshaw Broadens Identity

On March 5th, 2015, a leading authority in the area of civil rights, black feminist legal theory, race, racism, and the law, Kimberle Crenshaw shared her groundbreaking work on “intersectionality” in this fascinating keynote, explaining our inabilities to view oppression in society as interrelated categories instead of separate ones. Professor Kimberle Crenshaw is a professor of law at both UCLA and Columbia Law School. She researches and writes about civil rights, black feminist legal theory, race, racism, and the law. She was a founder and has been a leader in the intellectual movement called Critical Race Theory and co-editor of “Critical Race Theory: Key Documents That Shaped the Movement.” Throughout her presentation, Crenshaw emphasized that separating gender from racial inequality can result in greater oppression for those who stand at the intersection of these categories, such as black women. To support her claim, Crenshaw spoke about the prison pipeline, which tends to exclude black women’s experiences and amelioration, and the goals of liberal feminism, which tend to be dominated by white women. Overall, Crenshaw illustrated the importance of taking a dynamic approach to law, policy, and social justice, or else all of these domains will better the lives of some and marginalize others.

Source: http://www.law.uconn.edu/calendar/event/2015/03/05/intersectional-paradigm-race-gender-work-life-politics

Edited and Revised for the WGSS Newsletter by Austin Heffernan
The WGSS program wouldn’t be possible without our dedicated teaching faculty. Each individual brings a unique experience and expertise into the classroom in order to educate students about oppression, power and privilege, inequality, and social justice of all marginalized identities. Instead of briefly listing who our faculty are and their accomplishments, this year WGSS wants to show you who they are and highlight specific student experiences that reflect their amazing work.

To achieve this task, we scoured Rate My Professor, a nationwide student tool used to share personal classroom experiences, in order to find out what students were saying about WGSS teaching faculty outside of University surveys and measurements. A list of top-rated professors (overall ratings of 4-5) were compiled with a WGSS tag and positive, meaningful reviews were collected. Of these reviews, five of the best ones, in terms of overall impact and content, are featured here.

**Rate My Professor**

**INSTRUCTOR: Anna Hayrapetyan**

**WGSS 1104**

Loved the class! Professor Hayrapetyan was very nice and easy to talk with. She made it a great learning environment. The class was really engaging and everyone was able to contribute their thoughts which made the class enjoyable. Interesting and eye opening class.

**Rate My Professor**

**INSTRUCTOR: Barbara Gurr**

**WGSS 3998**

I have taken Barb several times because she’s such an inspiring woman who shares her passion with her students. She really wants you to learn about important topics in our world and if you ever get the chance to take a WGSS class, definitely take her. You won’t regret it.

**Rate My Professor**

**INSTRUCTOR: Daniel Silvermint**

**WGSS 1105**

This was the first course he taught at UConn and he did a great job. Being a guy I never thought I would even participate in this class. Even though participation is worth a huge part of the grade, I found myself participating willingly. He does great job of getting students interested. I recommend him for any course. Good moderator and cool guy.

**Rate My Professor**

**INSTRUCTOR: Laura Mauldin**

**WGSS 2105W**

Mauldin is a fantastic professor. She truly has a passion for what she teaches and makes class super interesting and fun. Classes are discussions and the only assignments are a small class presentation and an overall paper. She likes to see effort from her students and an overall interest in the topics. She is awesome!

**Rate My Professor**

**INSTRUCTOR: Marita McComiskey**

**WGSS 3894**

ABSOLUTELY AMAZING PROFESSOR. Totally changed the way I look at the world and I now have new plans for what I want to do/who I want to be. The work is challenging and there’s a lot of it, but nothing is useless—everything helps you learn/grow in some way. My experience at UConn wouldn’t be the same without her. If you get a chance, take her class.
In Sherry Zane’s “Gender Representations in Popular US Culture” class, students were asked to construct body maps, artistic and symbolic representations of the body, in order to show how culture is inscribed onto bodies and how these inscriptions affect personal identity. In other words, certain characteristics of our bodies influence how we are raised, treated, and understood in popular culture socially, politically, economically, institutionally, etc. In turn, these influences affect how we perceive ourselves and how we navigate the world. Our bodies tell stories, but only because the story has been constructed by society, yet we continue to tell them every day.

Shaylyn Young is a junior with a Psychology major and a minor in Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies. Her interests include reading, writing, challenging binaries, clinical, and Four Arrows.

“The most potent effects of mass media is how they subtly influence their audiences to perceive social roles.” – James Lull

Pop culture is a form of agency control in which the media shapes certain events and topics, thereby illustrating what we should and will think is important. It’s bewildering when people claim that TV isn’t educational. Maybe television doesn’t always teach positive messages or idealistic preachings, but it sure is educational. Sitting in front of the TV we absorb all those subtle messages that Lull is talking about. My body map speaks to the teachings I derived from media consumption, specifically. I’ve noticed messages about what it means to be an African American woman. My Body Map presents myself as a board game called “Scene It,” demonstrating that life is a process from start to finish. The game Scene It uses video clips and movie trivia in order to progress in the game. The assembly of myself as a board game also demonstrates how women are constantly being objectified. For the trivia game cards, I used examples of how specific TV programs influenced my life. For example, one card I constructed asked what year the first African American Disney princess originated. Princess Tiana was the first African American princess in Disney’s Princess and the Frog which wasn’t released until 2009. This is great, but having grown up without any representation of African American princesses implicitly taught me that being black meant you weren’t qualified to be crowned beautiful, smart or desirable. The Buzz cards in the game Scene It make a statement and, depending on this statement, ask you to move forward, move backwards, or to a skip a turn. This is easily transferrable to life; good things move you forward and bad things send you in the opposite direction. An example of a Buzz card I created was, “Your favorite show, The Vampire Diaries, only depicts African Americans as witches. Go back three spaces.” The map isn’t solely media, but also personal anecdotes regarding race such as, when growing up, I witnessed someone say, “Black people are dirty.” The overall building of the body map was pretty insightful in terms of pinpointing how childhood media impacted my life and continues to still impede on self-concepts with current day examples. However, this understanding of how narrow representation is can be used to combat negative self beliefs about race, and adopt a sense of pride in being confident in who I am, my culture, and my identity.
Shaylyn Young is a junior with a Psychology major and a minor in Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies. Her interests include reading, writing, challenging binaries, clinical, and Four Arrows. “The most potent effects of mass media is how they subtly influence their audiences to perceive social roles.” – James Lull

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Michael Stankiewicz is a graduating senior with a major in English and a minor in Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies. He enjoys writing poetry, painting, and has recently developed an interest in performance art.

There are three faces in the head-space of my body map. A pink ribbon coming from the mouth of one of the faces represents my relatively new found voice as a feminist. The faces are watercolor portraits of people in my life who shaped my notions of masculinity and femininity. Generally speaking, I believe we are conglomerates of everyone we’ve encountered, rather than merely a production of popular culture.

My body map contains many contradictory images. You’ll see images of young people in contrast with pictures of weapons. The guns and bullet casings on the body map are fairly self explanatory. The relationship between children and celebrated violence is a direct one in U.S. popular culture. I was raised in a kind of gun-culture fog that I never really paused to think about. I’d waited patiently until I turned 21 so that I could get my pistol permit. As soon as I did, I began peeling back the layers and wondering why I had this unrelenting desire for guns. The permit application has stayed magnet-stuck to my refrigerator ever since I began this dialogue.
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