I'm a Graduate Assistant in the Women's and Gender Studies department at the University of South Florida; and I love Muppets. Yes, I mean the Muppets as in Kermit the Frog, Miss Piggy, Gonzo, and Fozzie Bear. Not only do I love the Muppets, I believe they embody an important cultural phenomenon that still resonates today. The Muppets challenge socially constructed norms regarding gender, race, sexuality, and issues concerning authority and normalcy. They do so in a way that embraces nonsense and the ridiculous: the stranger the better.

I think in order to really illustrate the impact of the Muppets, I need to provide a little background. Jim Henson, the creator of the still popular children's educational television show Sesame Street, created The Muppet Show because he did not want his Muppets to be pigeonholed as something solely for children. Henson believed his Muppets could be appealing to both adults and children; he wanted to design something that families could watch and enjoy together. Henson succeeded in this endeavor and The Muppet Show aired from 1976 to 1981; it aired in over one hundred countries at its peak.

For the time period it aired, The Muppet Show maintained liberal views and an accepting manner for all walks of life. There are hundreds of different skits in the Muppets repertoire and some of these skits challenge our constructed ideas about gender, sexual identity, and race. The Muppet Show provided a satirical look at the current events of its time. It faced criticism from many different institutions in large cities for the satirical spin the show gave to important headlines and events. Even looking at specific characters on the show, we are able to see the opinions of certain institutions. Sam the Eagle is a conservative character that tries to censor the other Muppets; he constantly attempts to bring class and order to the variety show and usually fails. Sam, like much of society, does not agree with opinions differing from his own. I believe Sam was a vehicle used by Henson to voice the criticisms he received to his liberal show. By using Sam to illuminate these criticisms, he was able to frame them in a humorous light and debunk them.

The Muppets were forward thinking in the construction of gender and gender identity. There is not a “norm” in Muppet thinking. The Muppets are constantly bending and breaking gender and gender constructs. In the frequent skit “At the Dance,” various Muppets are paired up and dance around the room. However, if we look at the pairing of the Muppets, most of them look radically different than one another. One specific pairing involves a Muppet that resembles a monster and one that is clearly human. The Muppets clearly don’t care about interspecies relationships or looks. In many of the Muppets, a gender identity is never confirmed (and it is difficult to tell based on physical appearance). Some Muppet characters, like Sweetums, look distinctly aggressive and male; however, their gender identity is never confirmed. Muppets also break gendered stereotypes. This is apparent in the ferocious way the aggressive Miss Piggy chases a passive Kermit.

One skit that helps debunk the social construct of beauty is the “I Feel Pretty” skit in season one. It begins with a pretty blonde Muppet talking about how she is getting ready for a date. She begins to sing “I Feel Pretty,” the popular song from West Side Story as she gets ready for her date. As she sings each line she does something to transform her appearance; she removes her hair, nose, eyes, etc. At the end of the song she is an ugly monster and yet, she still feels beautiful. When her date shows up, he tells her she looks beautiful.

Dr. Marilyn Myerson recent retiree (again!) from USF, specifically Interim Chair of the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies last year, has a busy schedule. She just completed guest lectures on “celebration menstruation” in Jennifer Ellerman’s and Amanda LeBlanc’s HSB classes and I imagine had lots of fun too.

She is presenting at the For the Good Life Conference along with several of the grad students who are also presenting, more on that later!

Marilyn is also presenting on a panel entitled “Spirituality, Sexuality, Excellence: Themes in Feminist Pedagogy at South Florida and her talk is...

“At Play in the Fields of Academe: Feminist Scholars Explore Sexuality”. Wow, that is a presentation that I can’t miss for sure.

Don’t forget the “The Waiting Room” and Art Crawl” at the end of September as well.
Dr. Jennifer Lewis, New Interim Chair

It is both exciting and challenging to be the new interim Chair of Women’s and Gender Studies. The excitement comes from the many positive possibilities for the department, and the challenge from having to choose in what order to pursue them! I am finding that I would like each day to be at least two hours longer, but I truly enjoy coming into the department every day, talking with my colleagues — graduate students, faculty, and staff — and seeing all of us move forward with plans for success.

Two pieces of good news stem from continuing the work Dr. Marilyn Myerson began last year. Dr. Sara Crawley from the Department of Sociology has entered into a second Memorandum of Understanding with our department, which means she’ll teach one of her excellent courses for us each semester for the next two years. I am also pleased to report that Dr. Myerson’s groundwork last year with the Community Advisory Board has resulted in a stronger connection between that group and the department this year as well. On September 17, several board members came to the department and met with the graduate students and faculty. Plans are afoot for a “meet and greet” on the St. Petersburg campus later this semester. As a department, we are also working on continuing to update the web site so that it will be easier for the community to discover who we are and what we do.

The Kids are Alright Project

I am ecstatic to be the newest Women’s and Gender Studies Graduate Assistant! I moved to Tampa after I graduated from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. While I was at Emory, my academic work was mostly in the fields of Women’s Studies, French & Italian Studies, and Sociology. My scholarly interests include feminist pedagogy, queer theory, critical race theory, disability theory, social justice, and feminist media studies.

Quite recently, Mary Catherine Whitlock and I found out that our research was selected for the 2010 Research One Week Graduate Student Research Symposium. We will present our poster on our analysis of the cinematic comedy The Kids are Alright (2010) on Thursday, October 14 at the Interdisciplinary Research Building Galleria, and we would love your support!

Working with Zoe (also known in some circles as Superfine) has been a joy. Although we might not agree on our favorite theorists, snack foods or appropriate places to study, it is through our interests and research that we have found friendship. Not to get too sappy, but we push one another to be the best graduate student possible. On top of presenting at the 2010 Research One Week Graduate Student Research Symposium, we are currently working on an amazingly extensive paper to accompany our research on The Kids are Alright that we are hoping to publish.

Dr. Ednie Kaeh Garrison, Visiting Assistant Professor

Ednie is attending two conferences this fall. From October 28-30, 2010, she will be chairing and providing commentary on a session, “Queer Commodities: Visual, Sartorial, and Musical Palimpsests,” at the Mid-Atlantic American Culture Association (MAPACA) conference in Alexandria, VA. The second conference is the annual meeting of NWSA (the National Women’s Studies Association) being held in Denver, CO November 11-14, 2010. At NWSA Ednie is presenting a paper, “Rhizomatic Divergences: Queer Studies, Women of Color Feminism, Women’s Studies and Ruptures in U.S. Feminist Consciousness,” in a session titled Disciplinary Convergences, Displacements, Erasures. In addition to presenting her own research, she will also moderate two sessions: the first is titled (Em)bodying Disabilities: Exploding Difference & Inclusion, and second is titled Gender, Embodiment, and Performance.

Besides preparing for conferences, Ednie is also working on revisions to an essay that combines personal narrative and theoretical critique for Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies. The essay, tentatively titled “Always (Almost) Becoming Queer: Somatic Reflections,” started out as a special request from Feminist Theory students that the professor take up the challenge to write her own personal narrative, since they were being required to do so for credit.
Grad Assistants’ Aspirations & Goals

Students and faculty from the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies will be presenting two panels at the upcoming Annual Meeting of the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language and Gender on October 14th at The Trade Winds Island Resort in St. Pete Beach, FL.

This year’s theme revolves around “The Good Life.” Associate Professor Emeritus, Dr. Marilyn Myerson will be participating in a panel on Feminist Pedagogy. Grad students Jennifer Ellerman (Moderator) along with Alaina Tackits (Hum/Cultural Studies) and Ash Landes (Spanish Lit), Jessica Collard, Morgan Eubank, Zoe Fine, Elaine Taylor and Kelly Ryan Wagner will be conducting a panel discussion on the class “Feminist Issues on Sexuality” which they took this past Summer with Dr. Myerson. Additional information on the conference can be found online at: http://www.osclg.org/conferences.

Cheryl is a second year graduate student who has always loved teaching and activism and is very excited to be a part of the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies. She has had papers accepted at the American Sociological Association and the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction and plans to continue presenting at conferences when she can. She is interested in learning more about the performance of gender, especially in online places and male dominated spaces, as well as, the development of identity and self, and intersections of race, class and gender.

The artwork is inspired by “The Female Experience in America” class. The artwork is collected for the Art Crawl for the Fall 2010 Event.

The Good Life

The 33rd Annual Meeting of the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language and Gender hosted by University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, October 14-17, 2010.

Moe’s Perspective on Parking at USF

It’s 9am. I am on campus over an hour early before my first class. My eyelids are heavy, my body is not as caffeinated as it should be for optimal performance (need to get at least two extra large 711 cups down the hatch to even function), my stereo is blasting awful, repetitious dance music that should have been left behind alongside glow sticks and neon parachute pants.... I am mentally preparing myself for battle. And where is the battleground, you ask? The USF parking garage.

I drive out of the daylight and into the dark, ominous garage checking my mirrors frantically – left, rear-view, right, left, windshield – they are everywhere. Undergrads. Worse yet, freshmen.

I drive up the 2nd story ramp onto the 3rd floor. The coast is clear. But I can sense them everywhere. I sip my coffee, swallowing gulps of courage.

“Hit me. I have insurance.”

I know there are empty parking spaces across campus – the Oracle reminds students at least a couple times a week. But who wants to park on the other side of campus and then ride a Bull Runner? I am not one for public transportation, especially in the early morn. (I consider the phrase “Good Morning” an oxymoron until noon.) Also, I paid about $170 for an annual parking pass. Shouldn’t that buy convenience to finding a parking spot? Or am I asking too much?

Women are stereotypically worse drivers than men, but I’m going to call the parking garage a queer space - everyone is equally as scary.

I find my space. Had to ruin a few people’s mornings but I’m in! I exit my car and walk towards the stairs only to realize one very important fact.

I forgot all my books at home.

By Morgan Eubank, Grad Assistant

GSO Involvement and Future Plans

Kelly Ryan Wagner and Moe Eubank are the new co-presidents of GSO. Right now GSO is getting ready to host the 3rd Art Crawl event sponsored by Women’s and Gender Studies. The artwork will be provided by the students attending “The Female Experience in America” class.

The artwork is inspired by “The Waiting Room”; which is the theatre production directed by Lisa Powers. “The Waiting Room” is in partnership with WGS and PACE a center for girls. WGS and PACE are also hosting a women’s health symposium following the September 29th performance of the play.

Kelly will hopefully be starting her internship with PACE very soon which will guide her toward finishing her work and obtaining her Master’s Degree.

Unlike most of the Women’s and Gender Studies graduate students, Kelly has chosen the Internship option of the MA program where she will complete 240 hours onsite in the community and Lisa Powers will be her Internship Director.

Kelly knows that experience chose her rather than the other way around while working with Lisa in “The Waiting Room” and their combined participation and connection with PACE.

She looks forward to the future. Through Lisa Power’s, Visiting Faculty and her applied theatre class Kelly is also working with a drama group called ACT. ACT is a drama therapy group for children on the autism spectrum. GSO has also volunteered as a team for the “2010 Tampa Bay Start! Heart Walk.” You may join their team at: http://tampabayheartwalk.kintera.org/wtgso

By Morgan Eubank, Grad Assistant

Kelly Ryan Wagner surrounded by student art collected for the Art Crawl for the Fall 2010 Event.
I haven’t had the experience of seeing many women participate in what they (or I) would call, “the good life”. The women I have seen experience a good life have been wealthy and in a position to hire nannies, housekeepers, drivers and cooks. As a woman without these financial means, I have supported the efforts of my family to participate in the socially accepted definition of a good life. In other words, I have cleaned house, kept up with the laundry, planned family gatherings, vacations and outings, helped with homework, provided for schools, scouts, and churches, managed the household budget, shopped for food, clothes, shoes, doctors, dentists, batteries, toys and school supplies, completed warranty cards and filed insurance claims, all of this and more on top of working a full time job. I am sure that by now, you are getting a pretty clear picture. But where was my “good life”? Social and cultural messages communicated that my rewards would arrive after I did all of my female gender as-signed chores. That my good life, would be defined by being a “good” woman. I am a bit angry and not a little bit disappointed that my foremothers (who were of the same class that I am) didn’t tell me the truth of things. They supported the stories by not calling them out for the lies they were and continue to be. These tasks didn’t support my definition of a good life and furthermore, at the time, they made my good life an unattainable goal.

My good life does not involve serving my family either immediate or extended. It does not involve me giving every ounce of energy that I have to an employer whose obvious goal is to pay me the least amount of money for the most amount of work.

Understanding what my good life is not. I am free to make some statements about what a good life would consist of, for me. Author and theorist bell hooks says that “work makes life sweet” and I agree one hundred percent. Work does make life sweet. However the issues of unpaid domestic labor and the stories of the second shift are not sweet, they are bitter. Households cannot exist without some kind of management. Bills have to be paid, grass has to be cut, food has to be eaten and children have to be cared for.

According to a 2008 United States Department of Labor report, 59.5% of the US work force are women. Of that almost 60% figure, 75% of these women work full time. The number of working women is expected to continue to climb for at least the next decade.

According to the 2000 Census report, 69.3% of the population of the United States has less than a college Associates Degree.