

Director's Remarks by Jan Radway
Gender & Sexuality Studies
2020 Year-End Celebration & Awards Ceremony
June 5, 2020

Before I formally welcome all of you to this gathering and say something in honor of all of our students -- but especially in recognition of our graduating seniors -- I want to convey the Program's sincere thanks to Tessie Liu, Director of Undergraduate Studies, to Eliot Colin, GSS Program Assistant, and to Cassilyn Ostrander, Program Assistant for SPAN, the Sexualities Project at Northwestern. They worked together with great creativity to make it possible for us to hold a remote version of our annual Awards Ceremony and End of the Year Gathering. Always a joyous occasion in the life of the Program, this event is our way of recognizing the achievements and contributions of our students not only to GSS itself, but also to Northwestern, and to the larger community. We especially take heart in honoring the dedication and commitment to social justice that GSS students demonstrate year in and year out. So, although this year has been very different, and exceedingly difficult for many of you, we are grateful for the opportunity to see you all, even if only virtually. Today, we want to applaud you and your achievements and thank you for your extraordinary resilience and devotion to political activism, which you have shown not only this year but throughout your time at Northwestern.

I do not want to detract from this moment of celebration nor cast a shadow on what should be your time to shine in the light of your achievements and the opportunity to bask in the pride of your family and friends, as well as your teachers. But the gravity of the current moment weighs upon all of us and requires both acknowledgement and response. What we want you to know is that through it all -- in the last 10 days since the brutal and sadistic murder of George Floyd -- in the last three months since the uneven effects of the global pandemic have weighed more heavily on black and brown people -- over the course of the last four years, since the election of a man, who within the first month of his term signed an Executive Order banning so-called "foreign nationals" from seven predominantly Muslim countries from visiting the U. S. and prevented refugees from entering the country -- through all of this -- you and your generation have inspired us with your outrage and your willingness to act on that outrage. As a result, you have kindled glimmers of hope within all of us.

You have also pressed upon us that we must work harder and do more, with greater commitment, to ensure that real structural change is enacted and that anti-blackness and all forms of racism, along with transphobia, misogyny, xenophobia, agism, and ableism are not perpetuated through silence, distraction, or inaction. You and your generation have helped us to see that we must attend not only to the deaths, but also to the lives of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Renisha McBride, Laquan McDonald, Freddie Grey, Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Amadou Diallou, Abner Louima, Tony McDade, Dustin Parker, Nina Pop, and those countless others who, over the decades and even centuries, have been accosted for supposedly being different, violated because of the color of their skin, subordinated, maimed and killed so that others might profit or pretend to feel more secure. Black * Lives * Matter.

Today, we want to applaud you for your willingness to protest against such conditions and for your courage in calling all of us to account for the ways in which we still fail to measure up to the overwhelming need to change how we live and teach now. We have been stirred by student activism around the 50th anniversary of the 1968 take-over of the Bursar's office at Northwestern and around the departmentalization of Latina and Latino Studies and Asian American Studies. We have been impressed by student mobilization on behalf of Northwestern's food workers. GSS students were involved, too, in activities around the 30th Anniversary of the Women's Center and have continued to work on behalf of #Black Lives Matter, #SayHerName, #BlackTransLivesMatter, and the Black Experience at Northwestern. Most recently, we have been moved by the participation of GSS students, both undergraduate and graduate, in crafting detailed demands delivered to the Northwestern administration about investing in life-giving institutions and divesting in the police. We have also been moved by the activism of our students on behalf of trans and non-binary people everywhere and the role they have played in pushing the university to convene the Gender-Queer, Non-Binary, Transgender Task Force, under the direction of two of our GSS Advisory Board members, Héctor Carrillo and Sekile Nzinga.

Today, we want you to know that your activism has made us understand that we have to listen more acutely and in more sustained fashion. With your collective work and spirit in mind, then, the GSS Advisory Board has convened to discuss how we can respond with actual, concrete steps to the demands articulated in the Trans and Non-Binary Task Force Report. We will report on those steps over the course of the summer and into the fall. We will also be discussing how to better foreground in our courses and programming the transhistorical, national, and transnational histories of anti-blackness and all forms of racism and the ways they intersect with the construction of genders and sexualities.

There is much to do. But we want you to know that, together, you have lighted the way and we are grateful for all we have learned from you. In honor of your achievements and the role you have played within GSS, at Northwestern, and throughout the community, the members of the Advisory Board have made contributions in the name of the class of 2020 to a range of organizations committed to ending structural racism, economic deprivation, and white supremacy, and to the cause of social justice. We understand that every one of us must do our part to ensure that what the Reverend Al Sharpton said at the Minneapolis memorial service for George Floyd is true. We must make sure that "it is a different time and a different season."

In closing, I simply want to add that, with great admiration, we extend our warmest congratulations to each and every one of you.