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**CSW Update Newsletter**

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Director's Commentary: Why Seeds?

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## WHY SEEDS?

**W**HY DOES IT MAKE SENSE for those interested in gender and women to be interested in “The Cultural Politics of Seeds”? Because they are potent symbols of fertility, seeds present an ideal topic through which to prompt our feminist, gender studies, and LGBTIS communities to gauge their awareness of linkages between, let’s say, the devaluing of women’s worth and issues of gendered violence (for example, use of amniocentesis to select for male babies) to horticulture, soil health, and labor on farms.<sup>1</sup> CSW’s upcoming symposium on “The Cultural Politics of Seeds” also offers the opportunity to

acknowledge the immense scientific expertise held by rural women in their processes of farming—expertise that has been honed and refined for thousands of years.

This conference is part of a multi-year initiative at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women titled “Life, (Un) Ltd.,” which explores developments in the biosciences and biotechnology and their implications for feminist studies in the humanities, social sciences, and life sciences. In May 2012, Life (Un)Ltd gathered scholars from anthropology, sociology, film and media studies, gender studies, law, and literature to collaborate on cutting edge work concerning the uneven effects of bioscience/biotech on women’s bodies and the bodies of



1. See “The Gendered Politics of Food and the Challenge of Staying Alive” (xxviii), a 2009 Introduction to the republication of *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 1988, 2010).

poor people of color. These industries experiment on and trade in body parts, tissues, reproductive cells and germ plasms. Similar to that symposium, *The Cultural Politics of Seeds* emphasizes that reproductive issues do not end “at the skin” but include petrochemical and corporate infrastructures, environmental pollutants, foodways, and food scarcity. Through the stellar organizing efforts of Allison Carruth, Assistant Professor in the Department of English, under whose auspices this year’s conference has been conceived, *The Cultural Politics of Seeds* will gather scholars from the fields of literature, gender studies, cultural geography, anthropology, plant science, and environmental studies along with a well-known representative from the art collective *Fallen Fruit* (Mathias Viegner) and urban agriculture advocate (Tezozomoc). Scheduled to take place from 9 am to 5:30 pm on May 17th, the conference will bring visibility to existing UC strengths in cultural studies, gender and women’s studies, and environmental science.

Co-organizer Carruth wished to move the conversation around women and food from conventional discussion of issues at table to the more invisible processes of agricultural production and the various perspectives on corporate (genetically modified) seeds. Indeed, the project builds on two prior conferences on the topic of food justice that she convened in 2009 (at UC Santa Barbara) and in 2011 (at the University of Oregon). We both felt that feminist and gender studies scholarship had a vital role to play in assessing how we socially organize, choreograph, and narrate historical developments related to human agency over the food supply and the capacity to control (as in render dormant or awaken) the latent abundance that seeds embody. Through the cross-fertilization of aesthetic, narrative, environmentalist, social scientific, and biological approaches to this highly charged symbol of stored potential (the seed), *The Cultural Politics of Seeds and Life (Un)Ltd* are building a transformed gender

studies project that will be ready to meet the call for interdisciplinary robust scholarship on the most pressing issues of our times.

In celebration of International Women's Day, CSW recently hosted the eminent environmental philosopher Vandana Shiva. Dr. Shiva makes the complex point that one cannot think about women's survival—the sustenance of “the girl child” in rural areas of India, for instance—without also thinking about the imperiled status of self-renewable food systems (including animal husbandry, soil care, protection of the forests, and seed keeping). She notes, alongside other critics, that Western industrial farming (for example, the “Green revolution”) starts by belittling the existent “native” practices of so-called “subsistence” farmers of the Global South. The largely women's work of feeding the household, sustaining the food supply of humans and non-humans, and caretaking the self-renewability of seeds needs endless emphasizing as founded upon the horticultural expertise of female farmers, foragers, and practitioners of animal

husbandry—an expertise as scientific and complex as quantum physics. Our upcoming symposium features Lucilia Martinez, a maize farmer from Oaxaca, Mexico, who is precisely such an expert on sowing practices in Mesoamerica. Another featured speaker, Stephen Jones, is a crop and soil scientist—whose research interests may initially seem far afield from a traditionally conceived women's issue; however, a complex view of the interlinked systems crucial to the raising of generations of children entails not only being concerned about the scarcity of “food” (for example, edible grains for human consumption) but the acknowledgement of our symbiotic reliance on non-human actants, such as soil and non-edible plant matter, as vital partners in food sustenance, soil health, and the maintenance of life.

Another of our keynote speakers, Matias Viegner, member of the artist collective Fallen Fruit (with David Burns and Austin Young) will be speaking on their “Mother Patch” project in rural York, Alabama, which is sited on a one-fourth-acre watermelon patch. Akin

to other farming communities in the South, York has experienced economic decline and poverty. During a 2012 residency, Fallen Fruit interviewed residents and determined that watermelons once grew in the town on vacant lots; these plants were, in short, volunteers—growing from the seeds spit out by members. The decline of this local fruit source is a consequence of seedless industrial mini-melons sold widely in supermarkets. The gendered, classed, and racial meanings of seed-spitting (and seed splitting) should prove rich terrain for our discussions.

— Rachel Lee

*See page 6 for more info on the program and speakers.*