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The Arts & Academe

By Carolyn Mooney and Sara Lipka

Math + Women + MIT = Dramatic Tension

Lawrence H. Summers wasn't exactly seen as a cheerleader for women in mathematics and science, but the former Harvard University president has helped inspire a new play about a female Ph.D. candidate in the male-dominated world of elite mathematicians.

Gioia De Cari is the author of and sole actress in "Truth Values: One Girl's Romp Through M.I.T.'s Male Math Maze," an autobiographical, one-woman drama. She dropped out of a doctoral program in mathematics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the late 1980s, after earning a master's degree there. Her play had an extended run this past fall at Central Square Theater, in Cambridge, Mass., and a performance at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Critics called it sharp and witty, but not bitter.

The play's prologue discusses Summers, whose controversial 2005 remarks questioning the aptitude of women to study math and science contributed to his ouster from Harvard. (He's now the top White House economics adviser.) De Cari then tells the story of her math journey through a parade of real-life characters, including math nerds who wanted to paw her and professors who asked her to bring cookies to a meeting or wondered why she wasn't at home raising children. "The question is why a woman who graduates with top honors from Berkeley in math, and gets into an MIT doctoral program, ends up leaving," she says in an interview. "That's the play."

She adds, "And it's a very complicated thing. It's messy. Life is messy. And that makes a good story."

The Cambridge audience included many MIT scholars, including

Michael Sipser, the current head of the mathematics department, who took part in a panel discussion after one performance. "Honestly, I was a little apprehensive," he says, "but I loved the play." He did not know De Cari at MIT but says he believes the environment for women in math has improved since then. He was invited to speak by Nancy Hopkins, an MIT biologist who led an internal study that resulted in a highly critical 1999 university report acknowledging discrimination against female scientists. (She also attended Summers's 2005 talk—and walked out, disgusted.)

De Cari was scheduled to perform her show in San Francisco this month. Her sponsor there is the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute, of Berkeley, Calif.

For a taste of the play online, the Science & the Arts series at the CUNY Graduate Center did a [podcast](#) linked to the [New York Academy of Sciences](#).

Law-School Research Spurs Film About Guantánamo

Before three military judges, a Guantánamo Bay detainee stands in prison scrubs and a Muslim skullcap, his ankles shackled to the floor.

A tribunal will decide whether he is properly classified as an "enemy combatant." If so, the United States can hold him indefinitely. He must respond to allegations of terrorist activity, but all evidence against him is classified.

That scene took shape in Sig Libowitz's mind as he sat in a class on counterterrorism at the University of Maryland School of Law four years ago. The U.S. Supreme Court had recently affirmed detainees' right to be heard, and the course focused on the tribunals at Guantánamo. Libowitz, who began studying law after a career in television and film, discovered in the course a brief unclassified excerpt of a transcript. "He came up to me when class was over and said, 'This should be a movie,'" says Michael Greenberger, a professor at the law school.

Libowitz imagined a courtroom drama that revealed the broader tension between national security and civil liberties. "No one's really going to read the transcripts," he says. "The whole purpose was, 'Let's bring this into the light.'"

Libowitz, who graduated from the law school in 2007, read several transcripts to create four characters and a script. He took draft after draft to Greenberger, a former Justice Department official and director of the university's Center for Health and Homeland Security, to keep his fictional proceedings accurate. He recruited a director, film crew, and three seasoned actors—Aasif Mandvi, Kate Mulgrew, and Peter Riegert—to appear with him on screen.

In a moot-court room at Maryland, lighting designers removed ceiling panels to rig lamps. "For a few days," says Libowitz, "we turned this law school into a ministudio."

They kept the shoot short and the budget around \$30,000. Maryland helped pay, through its Linking Law & the Arts program, as did the Washington law firm Venable LLP, where Libowitz had gone to work. Most of the actors and crew members, convinced of the project's importance, donated their time.

The 30-minute film, *The Response*, portrays a broken system. Three judges—a colonel, major, and captain—grill an engineer about his alleged association with an Al Qaeda cell; he swears he was conducting humanitarian work. When the judges deliberate, all agree they need more information. But the major decides that there's enough evidence to hold the detainee. The colonel says it's too thin. "One for and one against," the colonel tells the captain, played by Libowitz. "It's up to you."

After a year of festivals, screenings (including one at the Pentagon), and honors (among them the American Bar Association's highest), *The Response* last month became a semifinalist for an Academy Award in the category live-action short films. Libowitz has traveled to Guantánamo as a legal observer, and later this year will take the film to several campuses. He is angling for one more screening—at the White House.

Environmental Films Beyond Polar Bears

No environmental topic was too local—or too global—for the Tales From Planet Earth Film Festival at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

The environmental-film festival, held in November, featured films

that examined immigrant workers at nearby dairy farms as well as larger issues of global hunger and climate change. It was the second such festival organized by Madison's Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies. Some 50 films shown over three days featured the work of professional filmmakers, as well as that of students enrolled in a course in environmental filmmaking.

"We took students with no experience, who were doing work in environmental science, journalism, and humanities, and in two months taught them how to create effective stories in film," says Gregg Mitman, the festival's curator and interim director of the Nelson Institute.

Mitman, who is also a historian of science at Madison, became interested in environmental films while writing *Reel Nature: America's Romance With Wildlife on Film* (Harvard University Press, 1999). The festival defines environmental issues broadly, to include where people live, work, and play, he says. "We're not just talking about polar bears as an endangered species, but things right here in our neighborhood, such as food equity and access, and issues of public health."

To raise public awareness about environmental issues, organizers worked closely with local nonprofit groups, inviting them to several screenings before the festival. One film, *The Hunger Season*, examines how food-aid programs, climate, and poverty affect one man's struggle to feed his family in Swaziland. Employees from a Wisconsin mill that ground cornmeal sent to Swaziland attended, along with farmers and agricultural policy makers, Mitman says. All were served plates of cornmeal similar to that eaten by people in Swaziland. A panel discussion on local and global hunger followed.

Other films included *Trouble the Water*, an Oscar-nominated documentary about New Orleans residents trapped by Hurricane Katrina; *What's on Your Plate?*, which traces the path of food eaten by two young New Yorkers; John Ford's classic *The Grapes of Wrath*, made in 1940; and *Cooked*, a film-in-progress on Chicago's 1995 heat wave, made by Judith Helfand, a former filmmaker in residence at Madison. Student films included *More Jam*, *More Jobs*, about a Madison sorority sister's attempt to persuade campus sororities to buy products made by local

homeless people; and *America's Dairyland*, which looks at the changing face (the "Farmer Juans") of Wisconsin's dairy farms.

To see trailers from the films, visit the festival's [Web site](#).

Scholars Scratch Hip-Hop Archives

A Cornell University course on researching hip-hop has given some undergraduates their first taste of archival work, along with new appreciation for the musical genre that came from the Bronx.

During the course, offered this past fall for the second time, students drew heavily on a rich scholarly resource: a large collection of hip-hop recordings, memorabilia, posters, and other printed material donated to Cornell in 2008. The collection, from 1975-85, reflects the early days of hip-hop, known for its innovative DJ's who manipulated vinyl records by "scratching" and street parties that drew rappers, break dancers, and graffiti artists. Hip-hop, which began as a grass-roots response to gritty social conditions, has since gone mainstream and is now a global—and far more commercialized—cultural phenomenon.

Steven F. Pond, associate professor of music, team-teaches the course along with Bonna J. Boettcher, a music librarian, and Katherine Reagan, curator of rare books and manuscripts, who helped acquire the collection.

During the course, students had the chance to meet several hip-hop pioneers (and primary sources), including Johan Kugelberg, an author who donated many recordings to Cornell, and the choreographer Jorge (Popmaster Fabel) Pabon. But for the most part, students hit the archives to do research projects—in some cases for the first time. Leah Bhabha, a senior majoring in French, did research in a variety of disciplines to produce a syllabus for a hypothetical interdisciplinary course on hip-hop. As someone with a longtime passion for hip-hop, she hopes such a course might one day be offered at Cornell. "It's a lot different than reading books," she says. "We get down and dirty with the stuff in the collection."

Students in the previous course held a public symposium on hip-hop, complete with a museumlike timeline, album-cover art, and live performances of break dancing, beat boxing, and turntable techniques for DJ's.

"Given the subject, it's a great gateway into original research," says Reagan, the curator. Other Cornell courses, focusing on African-American literature, English, and history, have also been making use of the archive, she says.

To learn more about Cornell's hip-hop resources, visit the collection's [Web site](#).

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