

# IN REVIEW: SPRING 2003

## DISTINGUISHED VISITING LECTURER:

**SEYLA BENHABIB**

by Caroline Arruda

Concerns over the issue of human rights were at the heart of the lecture given at HISB on March 10, 2003 by Seyla Benhabib, Eugene Meyer Professor of Political Science and Philosophy at Yale University. The presentation entitled, "On Hospitality: From Kant to Derrida and to International Law," posed the question: how are we to ground normatively the emerging international acceptance of human rights norms in light of present claims to national sovereignty? Humanitarian interventions like those in Bosnia and Kosovo, the widespread use of the concept of crimes against humanity, and increasing transnational migration are three interrelated areas in which the tension between these two trends is underscored. Whereas humanitarian interventions are concerned with the actions of nation-states against citizens or residents and the concept of crimes against humanity focuses on the relations between enemies, the issue of transnational migration pertains to individual rights. In this sense, the case of transnational migration is unique in that claims to national sovereignty are often used to justify refusing membership to aliens, asylum seekers, and refugees.

This issue raises the broader question of how the integrity of self-determining democracies can be reconciled with the consensus around international human rights norms without disregarding what Benhabib called "the philosophical self-understanding and constitutional commitments" of these democracies. She said that to ask this larger question in terms of the issue of transnational migration is to mediate between theory and practice. To establish the normative grounds on which to justify relieving this tension by considering the "right to have rights," Benhabib reevaluated the duty of hospitality as presented in Kant's essay "Perpetual Peace." That essay provides, Benhabib suggested, a robust conception of cosmopolitan rights that can be upheld without requiring either the apocalyptic end of the nation-state or an impracticable conception of world citizenship. Kant's formulation of the duty of hospitality serves as such a middle ground in that it is able to explain both our duty to regard others as "potential participants in a world republic" and the means by which to maintain the richness and diversity of self-determining communities. In this regard, "hospitality" is a "right" that establishes the standards for interactions among individuals from different civic bodies, rather than among members of one civic body.

In her seminar on the following day seminar, Benhabib argued further that accepting the idea of cosmopolitan rights in the context of this type of global vision would result in two kinds of practical changes: first, decriminalizing movements across borders and, second, safeguarding refugees from the state of permanent alienage that many currently endure. She added, however, that this push toward cosmopolitan justice should not be considered its final definition. Rather, our current task is to establish a moral politics based on the universalist claims of these movements in the name of avoiding seduction by mere "political moralism." To do so, we must formulate and emphasize a human right to citizenship.

## DISTINGUISHED VISITING LECTURER: PAUL GILROY

by Raphael Dalleo

In March 2003, the Humanities Institute hosted Distinguished Visiting Lecturer Paul Gilroy for a two-day visit highlighted by a public lecture and seminar. Although competing with the first truly beautiful days of a much-awaited spring, Dr. Gilroy's visit filled the Humanities Institute to capacity with members from all corners of the Stony Brook community. As his visit also coincided with the first week of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, this audience engaged him with particular urgency, in both his lecture "When Ignorant Armies Clash By Night," and the seminar given the following day "British Culture and Postcolonial Melancholia."

Dr. Gilroy, chair of the department of African American studies at Yale University, approached the global climate of militarism from the framework he has developed in his groundbreaking works of cultural and diaspora studies *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, *The Black Atlantic*, and *Against Race*. He spoke on a wide range of subjects, from the novels of Nick Hornby and J.K. Rowling, to Freud's pessimistic verdict on the Biblical injunction to love one's neighbor, to the recent death of an American peace activist in Palestine. All of these diverse threads were woven together around the question of, in his words, "how to dwell convivially with difference." The biological bases of the 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of race have been discredited, but their residue lives on in our present conception of the world's cultures as incommensurably different from one another. In this ideological atmosphere, dialogue is deemed impossible, and force becomes the first and final solution to disagreements. Gilroy urged us to reject the current civilizationist discourse and its notion that some human lives are more valuable than others, and to pursue a cosmopolitanism, or what he called "planetary humanism," which orients itself towards conjuring a new, inclusive humanity. To create a future not based on military conflict abroad and the policing of difference at home, we need to be able to overcome our collective imaginative failure to visualize a politics of solidarity which does not require sameness.

Paul Gilroy at HISB

