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International Resource Network (IRN) Presents Seminars in the City

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The IRN continued to make major strides over the last six months by organizing two region-based meetings (Caribbean and Africa), cosponsoring CLAGS-IRN Seminars in the City (see separate article: IRN Presents Seminars in the City in this section), and making progress on launching a revamped website that will debut our brand new logo!

In June, 2009 **Vidyaratha Kissoon**, IRN Regional Coordinator (Caribbean), along with **Rosamond King** and **Angelique Dixon** organized a five hour long workshop at the Annual Conference of the Caribbean Studies Association in Kingston, Jamaica. The workshop was attended by about 30 participants including **Thomas Glave**, CLAGS board member. For full account of the workshop please see our online version at www.clags.org.

IRN Africa also organized a major conference attended by Africa scholars and activists in Syracuse, New York. For more details please read "IRN Africa Conference" in this section.

As part of our outreach activities, our regional coordinators spare no effort to spread the word. **Jasmin Blessing**, Regional Coordinator Latin America, was recently interviewed on a TV show, "La Belleza es Mia" in the Dominican Republic hosted by transsexual celebrity, **Mia Cepede**. Blessing used her 40 minute interview as an opportunity to explain the goals and objectives of IRN. She nominated Mia as the IRN ambassador of the LGBT community in Latin America and presented her an "ambassadorial" sash, which Mia wore proudly displaying these words to the viewers of this live broadcast to several countries: "*International Resource Network Ambassador/A global network of researchers and teachers sharing knowledge about sexualities.*"

All of us at the IRN are delighted about the launch of our radically revamped website. The new site will offer features such as the enabling of RSS (Really Simple Syndication)



Jasmin Blessing, Regional Coordinator Latin America, on "La Belleza es Mia" with transsexual celebrity host Mia Cepede.

feeds, a more user-friendly platform and CMS (Content Management System), and a better integration with social networks including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Also, we have added Russian to the currently available site languages of English, Spanish, French, and Simplified Chinese. We'll be announcing the relaunch via the CLAGS website and email lists, so stay tuned!

Scholars, students, artists, activists, members of the LGBT community anywhere across the globe—we invite you to join us in our efforts to become a truly effective network and informational resource by visiting our site (www.irnweb.org)

International Resource Network (IRN) Presents Seminars in the City

By Naveed Alam

One of the major achievements of the IRN this year was our collaboration with CLAGS's ongoing Seminars in the City series.

The Seminars in the City series is part of CLAGS's mission to make scholarly research in Queer Studies accessible to the general public. The seminars, held at the LGBT Center, have been traditionally supported by a generous

grant from the New York Council for the Humanities; however, when we learned that funding would not be available this year, we decided to step in and co-sponsor the series focusing on sexuality and human rights around the world. The series titled *Axes of Desire: Gender, Sexuality and Human Rights* gave us the opportunity to promote our dual objectives: showcase current research on the topic as well as provide a public forum to

connect scholars, activists, and LGBTQ community beyond the academy. "Reframing Queer Sexualities in the Middle East," the inaugural seminar of the fall 2009 Seminars in the City Series, was held on September 14. **Serkan Gorkemli**, session facilitator and a member of the IRN Middle East regional editorial board, started the discussion by summarizing the current debate over constructionist versus essentialist views of homosexuality

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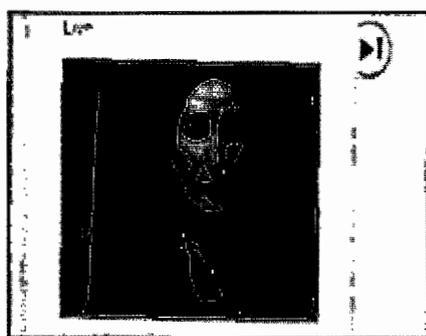
in the Middle East. Following this overview, the seminar focused on queer activist uses of new media, such as the Internet, which complicate the polarized, monolithic views current in the academy. This approach led to an engaging discussion on contemporary queer activism in the region, which is often insufficiently addressed in academic discourse.

Interestingly the second seminar presented on October 5, 2009 also explored the role of Internet technology in queer activism. The seminar, *Neither Heaven Nor Hell: The Reality of Sexual Minority in the Caribbean*, was presented by Angelique Dixon, a member of the IRN Caribbean Board, and broadcast live on the web. Dixon's discussion drew contents from relevant websites (including IRN-Caribbean), press releases, and personal blogs from the region, and led this well attended seminar through the variety of issues relevant to the Caribbean LGBTQ community as well as the work done to address the issues. The seminar highlighted the goals and achievements of the IRN-Caribbean and fostered a discussion in which the participants readily shared their thoughts, suggestions, and experiences about the realities and complexities of sexual minority activism.

Our IRN Latin America Seminar took place on Day of the Dead as celebrated in Mexico, November 2, 2009. The two presenters, **Anahi Russo Garrido** (Rutgers University) and **Raziel Valino** (Columbia University) complemented each other's work based on their research in urban and rural Mexico. Garrido presented her research on young women in "el ambiente" (queer spaces in Mexico City). She drew the seminar participants' attention to the fact that "el ambiente" as a space is marked by not only queer gender and sexualities but also economic class and symbolic global hierarchies. Raziel reflected on the gender identities of

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gender-intermediate figures who have lived their lives as men in the rural areas of the state of Morelos, both past and present. Both researchers led a thought-provoking discussion on the challenges faced by the Mexican activists focused on laws relating to sex change and same-sex unions, and how to come up with an inclusive language that takes into account the diverse gender and sexual identities across the country.



Svetlana Durkovic via webcam from Sarajevo

Our last seminar was a culmination of the technological thread of conversation in the seminars, at least in practical terms. Set up as a webinar, *Queer(exiled): The Identity Politics of the Balkans in Transition*, was facilitated by **Jasmina Sinanovic** and brought together two panelists via cyberspace: **Borisl Milicevic** from GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) Belgrade, Serbia and **Svetlana**

Durkovic (Udruzenje Queer) from Sarajevo, Bosnia. The panelists responded to questions posed by the audience regarding the challenges posed while negotiating globalization and fundamentalism as the Balkans states struggle to (re) create and maintain their identities. Both panelists emphasized the importance of "home-grown" activism; however, international recognition, spotlight, and financial support goes a long way to endure, according to Durkovic, the psychological pressures faced by the activists in places where activists can be subjected to state sponsored homophobia.

IRN plans to organize a one day conference as a finale event for the *Axes of Desire* series in April, 2010. The conference will bring together the regional coordinators and offer panel discussions and workshops on gender, sexuality, and human rights from an international perspective. More information about the event will be available on the IRN website.

We'd like to extend our special thanks to **Chun-Ping Yen**, IRN Web Coordinator, for addressing the cyber challenges and ensuring our audience in the regions under discussion had access to the seminars as well as opportunity to participate in the discussions despite the distance.