On the afternoon of February 4, 2011 I had the opportunity to speak with Carrie Tirado Bramen, Associate Professor of English and Executive Director of the Humanities Institute at SUNY Buffalo. Professor Bramen, a member of the English Department since 1994, earned her BA in Literature and Latin American Studies at the University of Connecticut, an MA in Critical Theory from the University of Sussex, and a PhD in Modern Thought in Literature from Stanford University. She teaches courses focused on 19th century American literature, U.S. Latino/a literature, cultural history, critical race theory, and transatlantic and intellectual history. Published in 2000, her first book, *The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for Distinctiveness*, was co-winner of the Thomas J. Wilson Prize for best first book published in all fields from the Board of Syndics at Harvard University Press. In addition to her various publications and recognition as a scholar, Professor Bramen has also been the recipient of three teaching awards for excellence in the classroom. Although she is on leave this semester while working on her second book, *American Niceness*, as well as an article exploring the concept of the “American flirt,” Professor Bramen was kind enough to take a break from her writing to enjoy a cup of coffee and to discuss her research, teaching, and the state of the humanities in 2011.

It was “through stages and through having mentors, amazing teachers who transformed the way [she] looked at things” that Professor Bramen arrived at her passion for literature and research. She left behind her early thoughts of being a playwright and a documentary filmmaker, two paths she knew would not “pay the bills,” when she discovered critical theory and fell in
love with it. She recalled her junior year abroad at Somerville College at Oxford, at the time an all women’s institution, as critical to her formation as an academic. “It was very Jane Eyre-ish living in the gothic residence that was always cold,” Bramen explained. “It wasn’t necessarily a fun and fantastic year socially, but I’ll never forget walking by the library and the little quad at this college and seeing the women working late at night. There were a few every night…It was the first time I took myself really seriously as an intellectual. I got back to Connecticut, and I got all A’s…I was already disciplined but [now] in a whole new way. The experience also gave me a new self-perception, as well, that has carried me through.” After graduating summa cum laude from the University of Connecticut, Bramen returned to Britain to pursue a graduate degree in critical theory, and then to Stanford for her doctorate. Though she had arrived at Stanford expecting to work on hemispheric studies (including Latin America), she took a seminar with Jay Fliegelman, who “catalyzed [her] love of the 19th century archives.”

Professor Bramen speaks about her research with an excited energy that confirms her genuine passion as an academic. Still, as a university professor, she also has teaching responsibilities that take away from her time in the archives. I asked her if this division of her time is merely an obligation or something that is important to her career. “I thoroughly enjoy it,” she began, “but I’ll be honest with you; I love the research, and that’s absolutely where my passion is…But, once I get in the classroom, I love it…You have the students, you have discussion, there’s nothing like it, and I absolutely love it.” When asked about her favorite moment in the classroom, she did not hesitate before describing an uncomfortable moment of racial tension. “I was teaching American Pluralism, and there was this really outspoken, wonderful African American woman in the class from the east side of Buffalo. We were talking about race—and this was back in the ‘90s, at the height of the multicultural debates—and she
said, ‘Sometimes I just want to kill white people.’ Without batting an eye, I said, ‘Thank you. Does anyone want to respond to this comment?’ And there was this silence. I’ll never forget that. I thought that was great. Those uncomfortable moments are absolutely vital and those are the moments that students will remember. Not everything can be comfortable. Given this country’s history and its present divisions, there’s going to be rage. I thought a lot of the negative responses to identity politics were really white academics not knowing how to deal with black anger, and why not just let it be, let it happen? Rather than having to control it and make everyone feel comfortable…So there are these moments in the classroom you don’t control, and, for me, those are my favorite moments. I used it as a way to talk about anger in the classroom. Do we all have to be so polite?”

The question of politeness is prominent in Professor Bramen’s current research and book project, “American Niceness.” I asked her what exactly she means by “niceness” and what this project hopes to elucidate. She explained her inspiration and the questions it has raised for her research. “After 9/11, I had a friend say to me… ‘One of the hijackers came from Buffalo...how could someone live in our community for as long as he did and still want to kill us?’ And I thought that was a great comment, not because I agreed with it, but I just thought it was so arrogant in terms of ‘to know Americans is to love us.’ And then Bush, I’ll never forget it, September 21, two weeks after 9/11, he speaks before Congress and he poses the question, ‘Why do they hate us?’ So, here’s 9/11, and the question is posed in terms of likeability or the failure of American likeability. Why do they hate us? As if 9/11 weren’t a far more complex and nuanced moment of crisis and tragedy. Why personalize it? So, I was interested in how the political becomes personal and why do we tend to frame these very complex issues in terms of likeability or being hated. The book focuses on the nineteenth century, when there was a self-
consciousness about national perception—how do Americans perceive themselves and how are they perceived by travelers from other parts of the world. Rudyard Kipling, for instance, was besotted by the self-possession, independence and charm of the American girl, and he concludes his travel narrative about the U.S., which was published a year after the Spanish-American War, with the following observation: “it is perfectly impossible to go to war with these people, whatever they may do. They are much too nice.” By the 1890s, the icon of the ‘nice American’ was already established. How did that happen? This book traces the various manifestations of niceness in the nineteenth century from feminine niceness, to conversational likability, to the hospitable Native American, and Uncle Tom and the ‘nice negro, and the nice Jesus, epitomized in the post-bellum hymn, ‘You have a friend in Jesus.’ What fascinates me about niceness is its banality: it is so over-used as a term, particularly in speech-acts, that it doesn’t seem in the least bit historically or ideologically significant, but it is. And this book looks at the multiple ways in which ‘niceness’ operates in US cultural history.”

While dedicating her energy to research aimed at exploring these questions of niceness, Professor Bramen also serves as Executive Director of the UB Humanities Institute. Given the recent cuts to the humanities at SUNY Albany, I asked Professor Bramen about her reaction to “the crisis of the humanities” and what it means for emerging scholars in the field. She was quick to point out that the crisis is not within the humanities but an external, budgetary problem that is being directed toward the humanities from the outside. As she explained, it boils down to a question of the language of the marketplace, and therein lies the problem. “I just don’t think that [the profit motive] can be the basis to determine intellectual fields of knowledge. Before 9/11, there were very few departments of Arabic and now that has taken off…You don’t know what fields will be absolutely central and relevant tomorrow. And so the humanities become a
living archive of knowledges that have to be sustained. Is [the profit motive] the basis for making all decisions in life? There is a growing sense nationally that the humanities will become the bastion of elite private schools. In the future, the question will be one of accessibility—who has access to a liberal arts education? And I strongly believe that students at public universities have the right to a liberal arts education that is well-funded and supported by the institution as a whole. We need to tell governors and state legislatures, “Enough!”—and that is already happening in the US as well as in Puerto Rico.”

I then asked Professor Bramen to speak about feminism and pedagogy. She was initially bemused but now accustomed to a common response from undergraduates to the word “feminism.” “I don’t like the name,” they tell her, “but I believe in [feminism’s] principles.” Unsure of what to do with this reaction, Bramen, in the mid-1990s, asked her friend Ted Pearson, an avant-garde poet, how to deal with this in the classroom. “He said something I’ll never forget. He said to me, ‘You’re not selling a label, you’re talking about a practice, so don’t get caught up on labels and naming.’” There have been tremendous positive changes, most notably in terms of Gay/Lesbian studies in the academy. “Queer Theory is a major field or subfield in the humanities now, and there’s a lot of exciting scholarship happening,” a significant development since Bramen’s days as an undergraduate. As for the current state of feminism, she believes that Pearson’s words “still ring true.” The aim of feminism, from Bramen’s perspective, is not selling a label. “Each generation,” she explained, “has to struggle with its own terms and challenges, and sometimes I think we have taken a step back from these debates and see the larger picture, and I am confident that the facebook generation will take them on.”

While the facebook generation looks toward the future, I asked Professor Bramen to reflect back on the many accomplishments of her academic career and to identify her proudest
moment. “It has to be the book. It absolutely is,” she answered without hesitation. “You have to maintain a discipline and a passion for a project. Beginning with a dissertation, it’s over ten years. That takes an enormous amount of focus and concentration. There’s a quiet gratification with that sense of achievement.” As our conversation came to a close, her eagerness to return to her “lair” to continue writing was apparent. Working on this second book, Bramen is “back for more” of that focused passion and concentration. She considers herself fortunate to have found another project that she can “just absolutely love for a long time.” Although, looking forward to that sense of achievement and quiet gratification, she was quick to add, “Hopefully not too much longer.”