

"Donnybrook at Stony Brook," *Lingua Franca*, September 1999

YOU'VE RESPONDED TO THE job ad. You've survived a battery of interviews. The chairman calls you up and says his colleagues have voted to hire you.

Is that what is known as a job offer?

It all depends on how you define "offer." Two factions in the English department at the State University of New York at Stony Brook have been squaring off over this semantic question since the spring. What's at stake, say some of the combat-ants, with just a touch of melodrama, is nothing less than the future of English at Stony Brook—not to mention the reputation of the university.

In March, the queer theorist Lee Edelman, who had been brought in the previous year from Tufts University to serve as chairman of the troubled department, called Modhumita Roy, a specialist in postcolonial literature at Tufts, to say the school's department wanted her. She had come up a winner in a search that attracted some 1,160 applicants. In a series of conversations, the two nailed down a salary and moving expenses and had only the timing of a sabbatical left to negotiate. In mid-April, however, when Roy called to put the finishing touches on the deal, an embarrassed Edelman had to tell her that Stony Brook's president, Shirley Strum Kenny, had pulled the plug on Roy and placed a moratorium on the department's other searches.

What happened? The president has declined to go into the details, but there were, it seems, two big issues at stake. First, in late March, Edelman had announced that he was heading back to Tufts, throwing a wrench into the master plan for rebuilding the department. Second, opposition to Roy's candidacy, simmering all year, swelled into an angry chorus as the actual hiring drew near. Critics charged that Roy, herself a Stony Brook Ph.D. And the wife of Michael Sprinker (a nationally prominent Marxist critic and professor in the school's comparative literature department) was the beneficiary of favoritism.

By now, everyone connected with the department appears to have taken a stance for or against Roy. Edelman called the revocation of Roy's offer "immoral and unethical." And Sprinker has taken an unpaid leave of absence for the fall and threatens to resign

if the offer to his wife is not reinstated. Graduate students, concerned about the possible loss of Sprinker as well as about the treatment of Roy, did their bit as well, staging a sit-in at the president's office. Literature scholars from California to Calcutta have also registered complaints. Meanwhile, the anti-Roy group says Sprinker is acting like a spoiled academic star. "I don't think he does his wife's cause any good by tying her position to his own contribution," says Joaquin Martinez Pizarro, a member of the English department. "It makes the whole thing look like a camouflaged spousal hiring."

In response to the departmental unrest, the administration issued a statement that seemed vaguely Orwellian: There had been no job offer in the first place, only "informal discussions."

"That put me in a very, very awkward position at Tufts," says Roy, whose first book, *The Sun Never Sets: Imperial Ideologies and Indo-British Fiction*, is under contract with Manchester University Press. "I was indeed asked by my chairman what that statement meant—it created awkwardness all around." She says she had already told Tufts that she had a live offer on the table.

Everyone agrees that when he arrived at Stony Brook last fall, with a mandate to rebuild the English department, Lee Edelman faced a challenging assignment. The department's members have long battled over the role of cultural studies and other extraliterary subjects in the curriculum. Edelman, the author of *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (Routledge, 1994) as well as a study of Hart Crane, had been wooed with a hefty \$114,000 salary and a visiting professorship in the comparative literature department for his partner, Joseph Litvak, who had been teaching at Bowdoin College. He was also promised between nine and twelve new faculty lines over three years.

After the department advertised three new positions, Edelman appointed a search committee. The group selected twenty-four candidates to be interviewed at the Modern Language Association (MLA) meeting. The grumbling started almost immediately. Some people thought that despite an uncontroversial system for voting on applications, certain candidates were getting unearned boosts. None more than Roy, in their view: Two members of the search panel had been on her dissertation committee, while others knew her through her connection to Sprinker (who had been her adviser). "I don't think

anyone would have looked twice at her application unless she was who she was," one English professor says.

When six finalists were selected after the MLA interviews, Roy was named as an alternate. Opposition to her candidacy solidified only after five candidates turned down offers. At this point, Roy stepped to the front of the line for a professorship.

The pro-Roy faction has accused President Kenny of being swayed by the unscrupulous actions of Roy detractors—thus undermining a democratic search. The faction that opposed Roy, however, argues that the search process was tainted by favoritism from the start. And it was a colossal error in judgment, they say, for Edelman to continue to negotiate departmental job offers once he had handed in his letter of resignation as chair.

Edelman calls the charge of preferential treatment "absolutely and utterly false." He insists that a list of candidates was approved by majority vote at each step of the way. He also stresses that Roy, although a "first-rate scholar," got an offer only after five people had turned Stony Brook down. If that was a rigged search, in other words, it was an awfully indirect one, requiring an absurd quotient of luck.

Edelman's supporters also point to a couple of fraternity-style pranks that undermine their opponents' credibility. One involved an anonymous flyer that appeared in mailboxes on campus last spring. The flyer mentioned her grade point average during her grad student days at Stony Brook—a violation of federal laws that ensure the privacy of student records. Paul Dolan, a member of the English department, admitted writing the memo, but says one of the handful of people he showed it to must have distributed it without his knowledge. Meanwhile, the right-wing *New York Post* wrote a hostile send-off to Edelman when he resigned—an editorial that quoted some of his article titles, such as "Piss Elegant: Freud, Hitchcock, and the Micturating Penis," and posed the question, "What kind of system is it that hires such academic charlatans in the first place?" Someone sent copies of the *Post's* editorial to Edelman's colleagues at Tufts, with the return address given—falsely—as that of two of Edelman's Stony Brook allies.

That the Stony Brook administration may have lent an ear to people who would stoop to such stunts has enraged Roy's supporters, including Timothy Brennan, a postcolonialist scholar who

left the department for the University of Minnesota last year. In a letter to Kenny, Brennan wrote, "Some of your very best faculty members ... have either decided to leave or are contemplating leaving because of the climate created by a small group of individuals in the English department who are, for the most part, unproductive as scholars, unaware of developments in the profession, and inactive as contributing members of the university community." And Edelman attributes anti-Roy sentiment to a "will to chaos" on the part of professors who are deeply embittered toward their profession. They, in turn, accuse him of using his stint at Stony Brook simply to enhance his leverage with Tufts (which offered Litvak a job this year).

At this point, the department has little choice but to start over. The university, in fact, has appointed an interim chair from the philosophy department and is getting ready to place another recruitment ad for the hot seat of permanent chair.

No word yet on when the advertisement for in-house psychologist will appear.