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English Department Spotlight: The NewYorkScapes Working Group

By Louisa Brady

In 2016-17, there were approximately 15 working groups within NYU’s English Department, focused on subjects ranging from medieval literature to Marx to digital media. In April, I reached out to the NewYorkScapes working group to learn more about the group and the work they’re doing.

NewYorkScapes
http://newyorkscapes.org/

Founded in 2013, NewYorkScapes is a research community that uses digital concepts, tools, and resources to interpret urban cultures and landscapes. Co-organizer Sara Partridge told us more about the group, their upcoming event this semester, and more.

How long have you been with the group, and in what capacity have you been involved during your time at NYU?

Sara: I first became involved as a first-year PhD student at NYU and became a co-organizer my second year. It’s been a fun way to meet researchers from different departments and learn about new directions in digital scholarship.

How often do you meet and what does a typical meeting look like?

Sara: We meet once or twice per semester to informally discuss one another’s projects, plan upcoming events, or touch base on the development of the website. We recently finished its branding and are looking forward to launching it in fall 2017.

How many members are in the group?

Sara: We have 5-10 members who are closely involved with developing the NewYorkScapes website, which we hope will work as a hub for spatial humanities research. We have a larger network of 20-30 scholars from different departments and areas of the university who participate in meetings and events.

What are you working on this semester specifically?

Sara: Currently, we are putting together an event called “Culture Mapping @ NYU,” which will be held on Friday, April 7 in Jurow Hall. It features a panel on digital mapping and interactive storytelling in the classroom, a keynote with Annette M. Kim, Director of the Spatial Analysis Lab at USC, and short project presentations by faculty and graduate students, ranging from the mapping of Roman coliseums to the cultural development of Broadway. We’ll also have a town hall in which we share ideas about how NewYorkScapes can best serve the NYU community. Please join us!

Is the group putting on any events or lectures soon, or have you done so recently?

Sara: Our most recent major event, “Solidarity and the City,” was in April 2016. We brought together a group of activists and scholars to talk about the use of geospatial mapping and other digital tools in community organizing efforts.

What do you think people in the English department should know about the group?

Sara: NewYorkScapes is a research community at NYU working at the intersection of spatial humanities and urban cultures. It facilitates project-based scholarship that uses digital tools to interpret and visualize cultures, geographies, and urban experience. If you have a project that might be enriched by any of these approaches, please join us for a meeting or event!

A full list of the English Department’s working groups and descriptions can be found here: englishchannel.hosting.nyu.edu/working-groups/
Rebecca Goldstein on the Dialogue Between Philosophy and English

By Jordan Williamson

Rebecca Goldstein, a visiting professor in the Departments of English and Philosophy, moderated a First Wednesday symposium titled “What I Am Doing, and Why: A Dialogue between Philosophy and English” on March 1. Prof. Goldstein, a philosopher who writes novels and has taught in both philosophy departments and MFA programs, drew on her unique position in both disciplines to organize a discussion of how English and philosophy might complement each other. More broadly, though, this discussion considered how disciplines interact generally and the benefits and limitations of the disciplinary model.

Panelists included Prof. Clifford Siskin and Prof. Lytle Shaw of the English Department and Prof. Tim Maudlin and Prof. Anja Jauernig from the Philosophy Department. Prof. Goldstein chose to start discussion with a “brief and bold” statement of purpose. She sees intellectual work as addressing broad concerns: “What is, and what matters?” Science can tell us what is, while the humanities aim more at what matters. For Prof. Goldstein, the notion that “we are creatures of matter for whom the question of what matters really matters” gives purpose and urgency to the work of both science and the humanities as uniquely human functions. This view also, of course, necessitates cooperation between disciplines. No one subject or methodology can hope to satisfy fully our inquiry into the nature of reality and the place of humanity in it.

The panelists all, to some extent, organize their work around questions of disciplinary interaction. Prof. Siskin’s description of his current work centered on the organization of the humanities into disciplines, which has produced a structure he described as analogous to “homes and neighborhoods.” There is, for instance, the “home” of English within the neighborhood of the humanities. This model, according to Prof. Siskin, has worked to produce a body of knowledge on the subject of culture, but he wonders if the “success” of the model might necessitate “succession,” or its replacement with a new organization of the disciplines.

Prof. Shaw’s work perhaps most clearly addressed the topic of dialogue between philosophy and English. He spoke on the relationship between literature and theory. With the advent of critical theory in the 1960’s, literature has often been attended to as a “passive field of examples,” but Prof. Shaw’s work on coterie poetry, for instance, attempts to discover moments when literature does not map exactly onto philosophy, and instead has the potential to deform theoretical models and invert the power relation between theory and the disciplines it takes as a subject.

Though he teaches in the Philosophy Department, Prof. Maudlin’s work focuses on the foundations of the discipline of physics, as well as the implications of the models physicists develop. Within physics, these foundations and implications are often neglected in favor of what Prof. Maudlin terms the “shut up and calculate” approach, which assumes that the actual work of physics is so difficult that attention to much beyond the calculations quickly becomes overwhelming. Without this attention, though, physics runs the risk of becoming almost a purely mathematical logic. Work like Prof. Maudlin’s grounds physics in real-world relevance while also making it accessible to those outside the discipline.
Prof. Jauernig’s work focuses on the history of philosophy. She orients her practice of philosophy around understanding rather than knowing, an approach that “maps logical space to see ways the world could be,” and establishes connections between these possible ways. The historical approach, she says, keeps the discipline from continually mapping out the same ground again and again. By clearly staking out where philosophy has already been, the historian of philosophy can show where the discipline should go next. Prof. Jauernig’s work, then, serves a refining purpose, which allows philosophers to pursue what she and Aristotle call one of the “characteristic functions” of humans: reason.

Although the poster for the event situated the discussion in a moment when the humanities find themselves “under assault,” there were varying levels of anxiety in the room about the states of philosophy and English. Prof. Goldstein suggested that the current political moment might require a special response from the humanities, while Prof. Siskin wondered what might succeed the success of the humanities. One audience member, on the other hand, commented that he considers the current moment a uniquely promising one for his field, neurophilosophy, thanks to advances in neuroscience that expand the scope of his studies. Whatever comes next, though, there seemed to be at least some agreement in the room that a willingness to engage in dialogue between the disciplines can only benefit the humanities as a whole.
John Keene Visits the NYU Center for the Humanities

By Gina Elbert and Gaby Flores

"John Keene is a writer’s writer,” Prof. Phillip Brian Harper told a standing-room-only audience on the evening of March 21 at the NYU Center for the Humanities. “His work constitutes a profound reckoning with language.”

The particular work in question that night was Keene’s second book, Counternarratives (New Directions, 2015). Defying questions of genre, Counternarratives is not a work that can be described easily: it’s not a novel, like the book Keene is working on at the moment, though it seems to be one. It’s more a gathering of short stories, novellas, and other works inspired by historical events and people that Keene characterizes as “analytical fiction.” These stories move between generic conventions, carrying us along, sometimes against our will, to the point where we surrender ourselves to them.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE
The discussion of Gloss then developed around the recurring themes of water and geography in the pieces featured in Counternarratives. The novella begins with a mention of the Mississippi River in its first sentence and later shows the two main characters, Carmel (the slave) and Eugénie (her mistress) crossing the Caribbean. Other stories in the collection, like “Mannahatta” and “Rivers,” center around water as well. When asked to speak on this topic, Keene connected it to his fascination with place and setting. The image of water in his pieces also tends to reflect his own narrative structure and its insistence on denying boundaries. It was not a coincidence that Prof. Harper and Prof. Posmentier said repeatedly that Keene “diverts the river of language” in his work.

The centrality of geography to Counternarratives also emphasizes the sense of place and historicity of Keene’s work. Each of the pieces in the book focuses on a marginalized story, often one inspired by a newspaper article or historical document discovered by Keene while doing research. Our Lady of Sorrows, for example, is written as one very long footnote to a short description of a convent in Tennessee written by historians in the 1890s. One of Keene’s personal favorites, “An Outtake from the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution,” pulled from multiple newspaper articles and accounts to tell the story of a runaway slave in the 1770s. Like the other stories, “Outtake” shines a spotlight on a character whose story has never been told before. Keene explained that fiction is what allows us to do this, that historians like to stick to fact, but it’s fiction that permits us to enter the lives and stories of the past. He described his work as combining the traditional elements of fiction writing (pacing, drama, character development) with a critical historical lens.

The discussion of craft and writing opened up on a broader conversation about Keene’s inspirations, habits, and other work. He cited some of his inspirations as The Black Atlantic by Paul Gilroy, In the Wake by Christina Sharpe, and Clarence Major’s body of work. These are authors who, like him, uphold the tradition of black writers pushing boundaries. They tell stories that Keene rarely saw at school growing up, where the only representation of blackness he encountered was Jim in Huckleberry Finn (one of the pieces in Counternarratives tells what happens to Jim after Twain’s book is over). Keene has encountered and worked with many contemporary black writers, especially in the Dark Room Collective. Founded in the late 1980s, the collective is a community for black writers seeking a safe space for writing and a place that brings together great authors regardless of where they are in their careers. Keene strongly emphasized the importance of such a setting: “You need a community, not an institution, to sustain you.”

On this solemn but inspirational note, the event ended and Prof. Boggs ceremoniously gifted Keene with a CLS sweatshirt. Carried away by the flow of Keene’s words – his in-person diversion of the river of language, if you will – the audience walked away with newfound knowledge about just how far writers can push the boundaries of history, language, and genre.
Moacir P. de Sá Pereira gave a talk titled “Data, Data Visualization, and Literary Analysis: From NYWalker to Essay” on April 4 in Bobst Library. Prof. Sá Pereira, an assistant professor and Faculty Fellow of English, works in the digital humanities and on 20th- and 21st-century American literature. He describes his methodology as “mixed”: an “idiosyncratic approach” that “uses digital tools to analyze aesthetic objects.”

The primary digital tool Prof. Sá Pereira used in the talk was one of his own making, NYWalker, a program that can be used to track and map references to places in texts. He began his talk by analyzing Langston Hughes’s poem “Could Be” with NYWalker, to show how the movement from data to data visualization to literary criticism might work. The poem contains seven references to places, with two repeated. NYWalker was able to pull those places out of the poem and locate them on a map of the United States, revealing that two of the places mentioned in the poem, one in Cincinnati and one in Detroit, have been replaced by Interstate 75. With this new information in mind, Prof. Sá Pereira noted, our reading of the poem might change, making it “an elegy for African American communities destroyed” by infrastructure projects.

Next he moved onto a larger project, an analysis of Colum McCann’s novel, Let the Great World Spin. According to Prof. Sá Pereira, the novel contains about 780 references to 310 places. Using a tool in NYWalker that, in his words, allows users to “add semantic sugar,” he showed how he sorted each mention of a place by section of the novel. A user could also, for example, categorize the reference by speaker, or distinguish between its use in plot or mention in a discussion or interior monologue. The tool allows users to encode information that a computer could not discover on its own and that a human, having read the book, might catch but not necessarily register as meaningful.

Having sorted the novel’s references by section, and with the understanding that each section corresponds to a character, Prof. Sá Pereira was able to establish a geographical center for each section and character. One character, Ciaran, had a particularly surprising center. His section describes his move from Dublin to New York, and with the references to places mapped out, the center of his narrative “lunges” from Dublin to New York at distinct points. This finding offers, for Prof. Sá Pereira, “the opening for returning to the text.” The reader can ask “why is this the case,” with respect to something discovered through data visualization, and then “build to an article or essay.”

This is an example of what Prof. Sá Pereira calls “everyday criticism” informed by digital methodologies. It is, he says, “mixed methodological, iterative, and process-driven.” What seems important to him is the mixing of the quantitative and qualitative modes of inquiry and assessment, the acknowledgement that data capture and visualization is “not enough to stop the work,” and the fact that one cannot know, when capturing and analyzing data, exactly what will happen. One will always wind up with new questions.

Prof. Sá Pereira closed the talk with what he called a “changed map” of the process of reading. This new map proceeded from the initial reading to data capture and then to data visualization and then back to the first step again. When returning to the first step, though, one rereads with the data in mind, which allows one to look for new sources of data to mine and new questions to ask. Rather than foreclosing possibilities of interpretation or assessing the text from some objective point of view, the changed map Prof. Sá Pereira advocates is almost endlessly generative of opportunities to capture and use information. The process is “not enough to stop the work,” indeed, and is useful precisely because of that.

For more information about Moacir de Sá Pereira’s work, please visit https://moacir.com/
The English Department held its annual undergraduate Honors Thesis Jamboree on April 14 in the Event Space. The event, which showcased the thesis projects of the department’s honors students, began with a coffee/tea reception and featured three panels in which students gave brief overviews of their theses and fielded questions from the audience.

Director of Honors Maureen Mclane praised the seniors for the range and depth of their work. “Our Honors seniors have surveyed everything from the Fitzgeralds to flaneurie, from Jane Austen to J.L. Austin; from Chaucer to children’s literature,” she said in her concluding remarks. “They have written groundbreaking work on the newest writers in English and have revivified some of the oldest in the language; they have analyzed texts, paratexts, subtexts, contexts, and supertexts.”

Prof. Mclane also praised the seniors for undertaking humanist inquiry at a time when “a general contempt for art and scholarship seems to be the new normal.” She noted that the seniors exemplified what “humanist collaboration should and might be,” coming together throughout the year as an intellectual community in the “spirit of collegiality, critique, and encouragement.”
At the reception following the event, everyone enjoyed cake and toasted the honors class. Congratulations to our honors seniors, and many thanks to Prof. McLane for expertly guiding them through the year-long process of research and writing. Thanks also to Mary Mezzano, assistant to the undergraduate program, for her logistical support; to Dr. Amanda Watson, English Subject Librarian at Bobst, for her invaluable research assistance; to Prof. Jini Kim-Watson (DUS) and Prof. Nicholas Boggs (Director of Undergraduate Research and Advisement), who served on the Honors Thesis Prize Committee along with Prof. McLane; and to all the faculty who served as advisors and second readers for these projects.

SENIOR HONORS THESES 2016-2017

Louisa Brady
“Holes and Dreams in the Pursuit of Diversity Within Diversity: Louis Sachar’s Holes and Jacqueline Woodson’s Brown Girl Dreaming”
(Advisor: Prof. Nicholas Boggs; Reader: Prof. Sonya Posmentier)

Francesca Ciervo
“The Medieval Legalities of Raptus: An Exploration of Female Consent and Sexual Violence in The Canterbury Tales, and The Book of Margery Kempe”
(Advisor: Prof. Christopher Cannon; Reader: Prof. Carolyn Dinshaw)

Auriane Desombre
“I Will Not Be the Girl: Gender and Dual Narrative Power Structures Across Medium in Gone Girl and The Last Five Years”
(Advisor: Prof. Josephine Hendin; Reader: Prof. Una Chaudhuri)

Xiaoyoue Isabel Guan
“Ishmael’s Narrative Perspectivism in Moby-Dick”
(Advisor: Prof. Peter Nicholls; Reader: Prof. Jennifer Baker)

Amber Hunter
“Refusal & Response: Understanding Shamelism Today”
(Advisor: Prof. Wendy Lee; Reader: Prof. Paula McDowell)

Beatrice Masi
“Syntax and Slat Communication: The Grammar of Austen’s Characters”
(Advisor: Prof. Wendy Lee; Reader: Prof. Greg Vargo)

Alyssa Matesic
(Advisor: Prof. Tom Augst; Reader: Prof. Jess Row)

Alexandra Reis
“A Tale Of Two Fitzgeralds: Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald’s Save Me The Waltz and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender Is The Night”
(Advisor: Prof. Thomas Augst; Reader: Prof. Josephine Hendin)

Paloma van Tol
“Lovely In Eyes (Not) His: Re-reading as a Form of Seeing in Gerard Manley Hopkins’ Poetry”
(Advisor: Prof. Peter Nicholls; Reader: Prof. John Maynard)

Teresa Vu
(Advisor: Prof. Katherine Williams; Reader: Prof. Susanne Wofford)

Michael Waller
“Joyce, Shakespeare, and Benjamin: A Portrait of the Artist as a Flaneur”
(Advisor: Prof. Richard Halpern; Reader: Prof. John Waters)

HONORS THESIS PRIZES 2016-2017

L. Bouton Memorial Award for Research in English
Amber Hunter

Estelle M. Holmes Award in American Literature
Alyssa Matesic

Frederick Seward Gibson Prize (for best thesis in British literature)
Auriane Desombre

William Bush Baer Memorial Prize (for the graduating senior who has excelled in English and contributed to life in the department)
Amber Hunter

Ilse Dusoir Lind Prize (for best honors thesis and the department’s nomination for the College’s Albert Borgman/Phi Beta Kappa Prize)
Paloma van Tol

Roger Lee Deakins Prize (our highest honor for the outstanding graduating senior in English and Dramatic Literature)
Alyssa Matesic
Visiting professor Jess Row could just as easily have been a drummer as an English professor or a much-lauded author. But, despite his passion for music, he followed his literary dreams and graduated from Yale University in 1997 with a B.A. in English and from the University of Michigan in 2001 with an M.F.A. in fiction. The Washington, D.C.-area native became a full-time associate professor in The College of New Jersey’s creative writing program not long after and has finished a year at NYU as a visiting professor in the English Department. His wide-ranging personal interests and experiences as both an author and a professor have helped him bring a unique perspective to classes he teaches.

Prof. Row taught “Reading as a Writer” in the fall and “Contemporary American Literature” in the spring. The former focused on the intersection of reading and writing in an interdisciplinary leap that Prof. Row told me was exciting to have in an undergraduate English department. The class approached reading as an art form, viewing it from the perspectives of neurobiology, structuralism, oral history, and many other fields. Readings included critical texts, found poetry, and even maps. Prof. Row’s other class, “Contemporary American Literature,” covered select texts that were published starting in the 1970s and 1980s, ending with one released in 2015. It strives to fill the gap in contemporary literature offerings common at many universities. Prof. Row is just the person to teach it – he leads a seminar on the same subject at TCNJ and, as a writer, is very familiar with the modern literary world. One of Prof. Row’s favorite things about teaching classes here at NYU, he said, was the vast amount of resources and opportunities available to supplement his syllabus: for example, just as his class was covering the poetry of Solmaz Sharif, he ran into her on the street and had her come speak to his students.

As a writer, Prof. Row is able to bring a perspective to the class that a traditional academic would not. When I spoke to him, he told me that he does his best to come in with “the sensibility of a creator” who asks his students to consider how and why a text works, why it was created, and how it is in dialogue with others. He is personally acquainted with the authors of some of the works on his syllabus and is always looking for ways to get students to do creative exercises. In “Contemporary American Literature,” for instance, he gives students the option of doing one or two creative projects during the semester in lieu of traditional research papers.
Prof. Row’s own creative projects are substantial. He has written two collections of short stories, *The Train to Lo Wu* (Dial Press, 2006) and *Nobody Ever Gets Lost* (Five Chapters Books, 2011), and one novel, *Your Face in Mine* (Riverhead Books, 2014). He has contributed to magazines and journals like *The New Yorker, The Atlantic,* and *Ploughshares* as well as won a PEN/O. Henry Prize and two Pushcart Prizes, among others. Currently, he is working on a book of essays on race and whiteness in American fiction titled *White Flights* (Graywolf Press, forthcoming) and a novel, tentatively titled *The New Earth,* about a family that disintegrates following a child’s death after a protest in Israel.

The themes Prof. Row explores in these two books, namely the intersection of race, whiteness, and identity, are ones that draw from many aspects of his life. He told me he is particularly interested in “the nature of identity in a polyvalent world” and the importance of “locating the self in a historical matrix” that reflects both individual subjectivity and the broader social context of racial identity and class. These are issues that he has brought to the table in his classes, pointing out the inherent whiteness of narratives like Don Delillo’s *White Noise* in “Contemporary American Literature.” The experience that led him to meditate extensively on these topics was his two-year stay in Hong Kong, where he was granted a teaching fellowship just after he graduated from Yale. Having never lived outside the United States before and not knowing any Chinese, Prof. Row found out what it meant to be a total stranger in a strange land and how it felt to be a minority. He cites his time in Hong Kong as one of the greatest influences on his writing career, second only to his conversion to Zen Buddhism in college (he is an ordained dharma teacher in the Kwam Um School of Zen).

NYU has been lucky to work with Prof. Row during the 2016-2017 academic year and will regret his return to TCNJ next fall. He gave a reading at the department’s inaugural Creative Writing Track Reading Event on May 4 in the Event Space, and he will continue to collaborate with the university through the Creative Writing department next year.

*For more information on Prof. Row, please visit his website at www.jessrow.com.*

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**ELIZABETH MCHENRY AWARDED GOLDEN DOZEN**

Prof. Elizabeth McHenry of the English Department was honored with a Golden Dozen Teaching Award by the College of Arts and Science. She was one of 12 full-time faculty members recognized by CAS for teaching excellence at the Baccalaureate Ceremonies on May 18. Prof. McHenry, who specializes in African American and U.S. literature, has taught at NYU for 19 years. In 2016-17, she launched the department’s new Plenary Lecture Series for undergraduate majors enrolled in our redesigned gateway course, “Introduction to the Study of Literature” or ENGL 101 (you can read more about that new lecture series here). In addition, Prof. McHenry chairs the department’s Diversity Committee and has played a key role in the department’s recent efforts to incorporate issues of race and ethnicity into course offerings and also equip English majors with tools to address issues of identity and culture in their own lives. Prof. Christopher Cannon, chair of the department, praised Prof. McHenry for “focusing tirelessly and generously on individual students’ progress and intellectual growth both inside and outside the classroom,” adding that her pedagogy is “widely praised by students and colleagues alike.”
THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT’S INAUGURAL
ENGL 101 PLENARY LECTURE SERIES

By Louisa Brady

Last fall, the English Department changed its gateway course from the old “Literary Interpretation” to the new “Introduction to the Study of Literature” or ENGL 101. Prof. Jini Kim Watson, who helped revamp the course as Director of Undergraduate Studies, described ENGL 101 as “a kind of ‘boot camp’ and intro to the English major/minor.” The new course is designed to give instructors freedom in selecting their texts and structuring their syllabi but also to ensure that students “come away with roughly comparable training and preparation for their studies in English.” In order to help standardize the training across sections, the department has created a series of plenary lectures that bring together all ENGL 101 students regularly throughout the semester.

The eight plenary lectures over the course of the academic year were delivered on a volunteer basis by various English Department faculty members. Each lecture is given twice in order to give students flexibility as to when they attend. “The plenaries have a few functions,” Prof. Watson said, “they bring together a number of common texts across all sections of 101—which unifies the course and brings dialogue across the sections—and also constitute a common experience for all students across the course (about 100 in any semester), creating more of a sense of community.”

In describing what they look for in a volunteer plenary lecturer, Prof. Watson joked, “Mostly willingness!” She added, “We don’t have a checklist of approaches to cover, but we might get (for example) plenaries that showcase book history methods, world literature, poetry and poetics, postcolonialism, medieval literature, and so on.” Prof. Elizabeth McHenry, the Plenary Coordinator, stressed, “One of the things that we hope the plenaries will do is expose students to people and subjects and approaches to literature they might study as they move through the major.”

Last fall, Prof. Patricia Crain and Prof. Lisa Gitelman kicked off the series with a joint lecture on Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” (1844) from a book-history perspective. Students then attended a lecture by Prof. Una Chaudhuri on Suzan-Lori Parks’s The Death of the Last Black Man in the Entire World (1990) before seeing the play at the Signature Theater and having an opportunity to visit with the playwright. Prof. Cyrus Patell, who currently teaches at NYU-Abu Dhabi, spoke on Season of Migration to the North by Tayeb Salih and the concept of a “global text” that moves “beyond its local origins to become something like ‘global cultural heritage.’” Finally, Prof. Mclane, who is both a scholar and poet, used selections from her book My Poets to discuss poetry and the process of thinking about literature in writing.

In the spring semester, Prof. Carolyn Dinshaw’s lecture addressed The Book of Margery Kempe, a medieval text considered to be the first autobiography of a woman. Prof. Patrick Deer’s lecture looked at three short stories by Shiohban Fallon and Phil Klay, both established contemporary writers of war literature, to offer students a context for reading these stories as part of an ongoing war culture. Prof. Watson spoke on Shailja Patel’s Migritude, a book of poetry that blends poems, prose pieces, history, autobiography, letters, and timelines to establish the experience of migration in today’s global world. Finally, Prof. Jess Row, a visiting professor and fiction writer, presented several pieces of his own writing in order to engage students in a conversation about literature and the craft of writing.

The plenary lecture series is an exciting addition to the English major experience. “I would eventually like to see all our colleagues give a plenary at one point or another,” Prof. Watson said. “We are a large department and have wonderful strengths in a number of fields. We often find that students only discover their passion for a particular subfield late in their major: the plenaries would allow them to discover these subfields earlier.”
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT HOSTS FIRST INAUGURAL CAPSTONE READING EVENT FOR CREATIVE WRITING TRACK

By Gina Elbert

On the night of May 4, the English Department came together to celebrate the achievements of the first class of Creative Writing Track students. The 13 juniors and seniors who read at the event had just finished a semester-long capstone project workshop, led by faculty coordinator and colloquium instructor Prof. Nicholas Boggs. Over the course of the spring semester, students worked with faculty advisors who helped them write, shape, and edit creative pieces of their own making. This capstone workshop was the final step in a new four-class track offered by the English Department, which also required students to take “Reading as a Writer” and at least two workshops offered by the Creative Writing Program (students are encouraged to complete a minor in the Creative Writing Program as the ideal preparation for the capstone experience).

Following an introduction by Prof. Boggs, the students read from their capstone projects before a standing-room-only crowd that spilled out of the department’s Event Space into an adjoining hallway at 244 Greene Street. Each excerpt was moving and personal: works included poetry about the intersection of race and mental health, an imagined analytical dialogue about rap music, and a novel-in-progress that one student had been working on for more than a year. A list of the student readers and their projects can be found below.

The event concluded with an address by Prof. Jess Row, a fiction writer and visiting professor in the English Department. He praised the students for their hard work, reminding them that they always have a support network here in the department. He looked forward to the day when these creative works would reach a wider world and he and Prof. Boggs could go on the “old people’s social network” of the future to rave about their former students. He then read a piece of his own, “Summer Song,” which was published in Tin House in 2012, before releasing the satisfied audience to relish refreshments and discuss the students’ works.

The capstone projects and reading were hailed as a great success by faculty and students. After the event, Prof. Boggs said, “This was a thrilling event. Each and every student gave a moving reading, and the sense of community and excitement was palpable in the room. I’m exceedingly proud of these students. And Jess Row’s enthusiasm and contribution to the track this year has been an essential component of its success. We look forward to building on this momentum next year as an undergraduate program.” Capstone student Elizabeth de Leon, who worked with Prof. Sonya Postmentier on her project, added, “Forme, this experience has truly clarified what my writing is about, where it is going, and what it takes to produce a piece of work that I am truly proud of.” She continued, “My advisor was a great guide who helped me work on the logistics of putting together an ensemble of work, while my workshop group really provided an insightful eye and kindness that helped nurture every line of my poems. I know when I leave NYU this is an experience and an accomplishment that I will carry with me as I move on.”

Congratulations to the 13 students who participated in the capstone project, to Prof. Boggs for guiding them through this new adventure, to all the faculty advisors who helped on the projects, and to Mary Mezzano, assistant to the undergraduate program, for her logistical support.

2016-2017 Creative Writing Capstone Projects

Edwin Chen, In the Realm of the Spirit (advisor: Prof. Simón Trujillo)
Elizabeth de Leon, It Comes in Waves but Settles Like the Ocean (advisor: Prof. Sonya Postmentier)
Danny Garcia, Solastalgia (advisor: Prof. Jess Row)
Annesha Sengupta, Ma Baba (advisor: Prof. Nicholas Boggs)
Jae Lee, Devotionalis (advisor: Prof. Lyle Shaw)
Mary Liu, How to Say Thank You (advisor: Prof. Dara Regaignon)
Bridget Schneider, Home Again (advisor: Prof. Josephine Hendon)
Shivon Shah, Shortcomings (advisor: Prof. Elaine Freedgood)
David Sobalvarro, Even the Young Are Killing Each Other (advisor: Prof. Nicholas Boggs)
Thomas Twardzlik, And I Feel Fine (advisor: Prof. Patrick Deer)
Michael Waller, The Cheapening of Experience (advisor: Prof. Jess Row)
Caroline Weeks, Earthly Monsters (advisor: Prof. Gregory Vargo)
Porter Yelton, One of a Billion Insensible Stars (advisor: Prof. Thomas August)

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Photo credit: Elizabeth de Leon
VISITING PROFESSOR BRANDON WOOLF ON POSTDRAMATIC THEATER, SHAKESPEARE IM PARK BERLIN, AND MORE

By Louisa Brady

Recently I spoke with Prof. Brandon Woolf, a visiting instructor who taught two courses in the English Department this semester: “Drama in Performance” and “History of Theater and Drama II.” I learned all about his academic history, his two ongoing book projects, and his history of teaching and performing in both New York and Berlin.

Prof. Woolf did his undergraduate degree at Columbia University, receiving a B.A. in Philosophy and English Literature in 2005. From there, he went on to U.C.-Berkeley for his Ph.D. in Performance Studies with a Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory, which he completed in 2014. While a graduate student, Prof. Woolf lived in Berlin, researching contemporary German theater and performance.

When I asked him if his academic interests changed at all over time, Prof. Woolf replied in the affirmative. “I began at Columbia as a philosophy major in a very analytical department,” he said. “It wasn’t until much later in college that I added literary and performance studies and became very interested in aesthetic and critical theory.” Prof. Woolf’s interest in academic literary study began with a Milton course he took at Columbia with Prof. Julie Crawford. “Even though I was the least talented close-reader of 17th-century poetry,” Prof. Woolf recalled, “I begged the professor to let me into her graduate seminar on Donne and Herbert the following semester, knowing full well I’d get a B or C in the course but wanting to be in the presence of that passion, of the kind of person who found such joy each day. She let me into the course. And I got a B-. And it was fantastic.”

Later in college, while studying abroad in Scotland, Prof. Woolf stumbled upon the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, and it was then that “things truly clicked.” He “became obsessed with everything Brecht,” going on to direct his first Brecht play at the end of college and write an honors thesis on Brecht’s aesthetic theory. Prof. Woolf commented that his work is no longer “Brecht-centric,” but “most of what continues to excite [him] is somehow attempting to contact that spirit.” He added, “I remain fascinated by that combination of interests…fascinated by the power and the faith he found in the theater – theater as a social practice.”

As a graduate student, Prof. Woolf taught at U.C.-Berkeley and the Freie Universität in Berlin, where he was subsequently hired for a year as a visiting lecturer in Performance Studies. After researching and working for almost a decade in Germany, Prof. Woolf decided to return to New York, both to teach and to explore the theater scene here. He applied for, and ultimately was offered, a job in the Program in Dramatic Literature in the English Department. “It seemed like an absolute dream scenario – but one that was so very unlikely. But I was very, very fortunate.”
Prof. Woolf said that having the opportunity to teach exciting new courses has been one of the highlights of his time at NYU. The first course, “History of Theater and Drama II,” is the second course in a sequence of two courses required for the Dramatic Literature major. The course surveys Western theater, drama, and performance histories from the 18th through mid-20th centuries. In the course, students read texts from these periods as well as study how the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions affect aesthetic theater output.

His second course, “Drama in Performance,” focuses on “the dynamic relationships between theater, performance, and the city of New York.” While exploring critical approaches, students in this course also think about the city and its varied performances. The course ultimately addresses “how performance serves as a mode of understanding urban processes.” Prof. Woolf and his students make weekly trips to a wide array of performances and do theoretical, contextual readings in preparation. Among this semester’s performances are pieces by Okwui Okpokwasili, Daaimah Mubashshir, and Suzan-Lori Parks.

In addition to his classes, Prof. Woolf is also working on two long-term book projects. Postdramatic Theatre and Form, which will be out from Bloomsbury in 2018, “examines the stakes of continuing to use ‘postdramatic’ as a lens for studying contemporary performance.” The collection ultimately insists that despite “seemingly limitless performance practices” within the postdramatic, postdramatic theater is actually a formal category of performance. His second project, tentatively called Stages of Disavowal, expands Prof. Woolf’s dissertation project. This book reads Berlin as “a paradigmatic site to explore how theater and performance provide us with means to reshape our infrastructures of public life.” Prof. Woolf explores Berlin’s current reputation as a global “creative mecca” in contrast with the fraught history of this emergence. Of this project, he says, “I focus on the seemingly paradoxical circumstance in which those artists who receive public support make use of it in order to critically question its conditions and, simultaneously, work to imagine just how infrastructures of public culture could, even should, be organized differently.”

Finally, Prof. Woolf is also a theater-maker, having founded two public performance ensembles. The UC Movement for Efficient Privatization, founded in 2009, featured an activist performance ensemble that engaged performance as a tactical means of “creative protest.” Prof. Woolf worked with this group during his time at U.C.-Berkeley. The second group, Shakespeare im Park Berlin, created site-specific performances in Berlin’s Görlitzer Park and other significant locations, in hopes of “rethinking those dynamic spaces as sites of multi-lingual and inter-cultural performance, (post)dramatic experimentation, and participatory art.”

Since Shakespeare im Park Berlin closed in 2014, Prof. Woolf has worked at NYU-AD Arts Center, Barrow Group Theater, Dixon Place, the Connelly Theater, and the Kennedy Center. Additionally, he says, he has several New York-based projects in the works, including “a biographical reimagining of Brecht’s Mother Courage as a site of the destruction of the American ‘home’; a devised investigation of the five pages in the Talmud that tackle the ‘Messiah’; and a song-cycle about contemporary Black-Jewish relations.”

The English Department is lucky to have the multi-talented Prof. Woolf, with a strong, varied academic background, a range of ongoing projects, and a passion for what he does for theater.

You can visit Prof. Woolf’s website and read more about his projects here: http://www.brandonwoolfperformance.com/
The NYU Center for the Humanities hosted a celebration of Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior on the evening of April 19. The event, which marked the 40th anniversary of the novel’s first publication, was so popular that even standing room was scarce. Dozens of scholars, students, faculty, and others crowded into the fourth floor of 20 Cooper Square to hear Kingston speak about the book. Joining her were writers Jenny Zhang and Hua Hsu, and Prof. Pacharee Sudhinaraset and Prof. Jess Row of the English Department. The event was co-sponsored by the English Department and its Contemporary Literature Series, the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis, the Asian American Writers Workshop, and Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

First published in 1977 and currently in its eighth edition, Kingston’s Woman Warrior is a five-part book that straddles the lines between memoir and novel, fiction and nonfiction. It tells stories of her own childhood in California, of her mother’s and aunts’ journeys, and of the legendary Fa Mulan, a woman who served as general for the Chinese army in ancient times.

Earlier in the day of the celebration, Kingston had visited Prof. Row’s “Contemporary American Literature” class to answer questions from the students on the topics of genre, narrative style, and personal context. The conversation ranged broadly, connecting the book to I Love Lucy, the recent presidential election, and Norman Mailer’s Armies of the Night.

Kingston elaborated on these topics and many more at the event at Cooper Square. After an introduction by Prof. Row, she read excerpts from The Fifth Book of Peace (Knopf, 2003) and I Love a Broad Margin in My Life (Knopf, 2012), both works that treat the subject of Fa Mulan, whose story Kingston did not feel she did justice to in The Woman Warrior. In each of these later books, she tells a different part of the original woman warrior’s story in verse rather than in the prose style of The Woman Warrior.

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Kingston’s readings were followed by tributes from Zhang, Hsu, and Prof. Sudhinaraset, each of whom discussed what the book meant to them growing up. Zhang, speaking first, confessed a discomfort with how The Woman Warrior had been delivered to her in college. “I think there’s an internal struggle for Asian American writers and writers of color to have their art not be treated like a textbook,” said Zhang, “as if one woman’s experience is an academic roadmap to learning about a culture.” Zhang, who herself writes stories and essays about “Chinese-American girlhood,” confessed that she often felt as if she lived under the weight of The Woman Warrior. But at the same time, it has helped her contextualize the mythology of her youth. “There’s one sentence I always go back to, in the very first section of The Woman Warrior: ‘What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?’

For Prof. Sudhinaraset, The Woman Warrior also allowed her to make sense of her cultural upbringing. “I felt shuffled between worlds,” she said, “perhaps most significantly I felt and still feel the overwhelming frustration of being unable to speak in white spaces. I’m not sure that will ever go away, but over the years I have developed strategies to cope. Reading this book and being reminded of women warriors is one of them.” Upon rereading, however, Prof. Sudhinaraset saw more in the text than she had originally. “I’ve realized that the power and relevance of The Woman Warrior moves beyond one’s identification with the text. I’ve come to see how the book makes room for paradoxes that reclaim the dangers faced by Asian femininity and sexuality.”

Like Prof. Sudhinaraset and Zhang, Hua Hsu also encountered The Woman Warrior in college. “Since then,” he said, “I’ve read The Woman Warrior about 15 times, and it wasn’t until the fourth or fifth time that I realized I really liked it...at some point I realized that this was a funny book, full of whimsy.” Kingston agreed with that, describing how her brothers and sisters laughed while reading the manuscript. “My brother said ‘we did it,’” she recalled, “‘we’ve got the Chinese-American Portnoy’s Complaint.’” Hsu went on to say that there is “no right away to read [The Woman Warrior], but if you reciprocate the good faith that Maxine extends—the faith that when our minds stretch our limits, it becomes more than a great novel—it depicts an entire relationship to the world.”

Afterwards, the Q&A session buzzed with inquiries about genre, gender, and cross-cultural storytelling. Kingston answered each question wisely and graciously, explaining how powerful it can be for a writer to translate and transmit stories of historical figures and cultures. Writing Fa Mulan’s story in the first person, for example, allowed her to take on that woman’s powers and abilities and to stretch her own imagination. When asked about writing about a culture not part of her own heritage and whether cultural stories and traditions should be shared despite the fear of appropriation, she answered that each writer must have his or her own personal code of ethics and that she personally believes in the power of respectfully sharing stories across cultures.

Just as the last questions were wrapping up, students and CLS Fellows Danny Garcia, Annesha Sengupta, and Gina Elbert sneaked off to the back of the room to prepare and carry out the birthday cake that the event sponsors had purchased for Kingston. The cake featured the cover of the first edition of The Woman Warrior and was illuminated by 20 golden candles. The CLS Fellows carried out the cake as the audience sang “Happy Birthday” to Kingston’s book and then served slices to all gathered (a video of this moment can be found on the Vintage Books & Anchor Books Facebook page).

The event closed with a book signing and reception, during which audience members mingled with each other, sharing in their admiration of Kingston and her work while enjoying sundry refreshments and waiting in line for Kingston to sign their books.

As the night wound down, Kingston’s words continued to resonate through the room. “Women need power,” she had said at one point during the panel discussion, “What I’m doing is telling you myths that you might have forgotten, or that you don’t know about. And when you hear those stories of superheroes then you will acquire those powers.”
BOOK REVIEW: RICHARD HALPERN ON 
THE ECLIPSE OF ACTION

By Ryan Campagna

Facing the ghost of his father, who beckons him forward, Hamlet famously asks, “Whither wilt thou lead me?” The image of this tragic figure questioning the ambiguous status of his future expresses yet a greater symbolic and meta-generic concern: “whither” the genre of tragedy itself? That is, what has tragedy become and what is to become of it? The anxiety of such a question lurks behind the claims of George Steiner when he notoriously argues that tragedy, proven to be at odds with the state of modernity, has died. Steiner’s ideas book-end Richard Halpern’s newest work, Eclipse of Action: Tragedy and Political Economy (Chicago, 2017), and ultimately provide quite a colossal and ambitious, yet well-matched, sparring partner for Halpern’s own thinking. Halpern diagnoses the problem of tragedy’s decline with a very compelling and rigorous explanation, one that couples a grain of optimism with a heap of unease: tragedy has not died, but it is in crisis, and this crisis stems not from the modern worldviews of rationalism and secular metaphysics (à la Steiner), but rather it indicates a much bigger issue within the logic of capitalist culture: the eclipse of action by production.

To see this bigger issue, Halpern invites us to consider tragedy’s debilitation in juxtaposition with the emergence of political economy, and he argues that the “crisis of modern tragedy is not...primarily a matter of worldview” for “it reflects a quite consequential crisis of action that afflicts modernity and is given its clearest intellectual form in political economy.” Specifically, the discourse of political economy does not directly cause tragedy’s decline, but “it gives intellectual form to conditions of capitalist modernity that do.” The weight of such a claim takes shape when considering the arguments of Aristotle, who saw action as both the very essence of tragedy and drama, but also as that which is most directly responsible for human happiness (or unhappiness). If tragedy was predicated upon action, or the imitation of action, and tragedy reflected the importance of political action to secure human happiness, how does tragedy shift when Adam Smith introduces the concept of political economy and argues that it is production and not action that secures human happiness? Ultimately, Halpern believes that “it is not as if tragic drama can no longer be written or staged under capitalism,” but rather “what tends to get hollowed out [by capitalism] is the political reach and seriousness of action, and therefore of tragedy.” Thus, at stake in his argument is not “a question of whether tragedy continues to exist, but of how and whether tragedy matters.”

In service to such a question, Eclipse of Action tracks the conflict between production and action, also translated as a conflict between making and doing, or, in the most classical sense, poiesis and praxis, as it is staged within tragic drama. To do this, the book examines a range of tragedians as far back as Aeschylus and as recent as Sarah Kane. Chapter one begins with a wonderful extended analysis of Smith’s claim that “a public mourning raises the price of black cloth” and considers the anti-tragic sentiments at the heart of his thinking in The Wealth of Nations. Chapter two examines the Oresteia and the “raptor economy” of ancient Greece to suggest that action in the classical sense emerges from a “matrix of production” and that Aeschylus’s trilogy contemplates the line between making and doing to find the appropriate place for tragic theatre in the polis. Halpern then devotes three chapters to early modern tragedy, specifically Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, and Milton’s Samson Agonistes. In these chapters, Halpern’s overlaying interest resides in the commercialization of theater that takes place during this period and how these tragedies, as commercialized entities, each begin to reflect the eclipse of production over action in their respective ways. Chapter six departs from a direct reading of explicit tragedies, and observes the novelization of tragedy that takes place in the 18th and 19th centuries, but does so via the unexpected route of Hegel and Marx. Chapter seven focuses on the theoretical inflation of action once it has been eclipsed by production and analyzes Samuel Beckett’s reaction against contemporary political theories that inflate action’s importance. Beckett chooses instead to stage the very impossibility of action in the age of political economy and the contradictory notion that actions, though they cannot occur, sometimes still miraculously do. In the postscript, Halpern closes the book by concentrating on Sarah Kane’s Blasted, a tragedy which reflects the dilemmas of post-Fordist action where action has not only been eclipsed by production but subsumed by it as well.

Ultimately, the narrative of the book delineates action’s classical birth through “an ongoing matrix of production” and the subsequent process of action’s eclipse over time by production. Seen through a metaphor of combat, action may have won a few early battles, but production won the war. According to Halpern, the eclipse of action begins with the emergence of modern commercial society. Political economy, then, is “the moment when this process begins to become conscious of itself.” The conscious devaluation of action by political economy then prompts a backlash by various political theorists who over-inflate the value of action. Tragedy indexes this conflict and becomes “a privileged repository of the hopes invested in action.”

Eclipse of Action commendably levies an argument on a wide historical scale with an intellectual scope that is of interest to a swath of various disciplines. Although it casts an ambitiously wide net, the book nonetheless maintains a strong sense of subtlety and nuance. Halpern’s resistance to the grand provocation of a claim like “tragedy has died,” an idea not just found in Steiner but echoed by thinkers such as Nietzsche and Hegel, demonstrates a rhetorical restraint that helps to make his argument so unique and sharp. Halpern indirectly forces us to recognize that whether tragedy is alive or dead is not as interesting as how it got there in the first place. Thus, the brilliance of Halpern’s argument lies not in its re-thinking of what became of tragedy as much as it lies in its re-imagining of how tragedy became that way.
English master’s students presented their thesis projects at the Spring 2017 M.A. Thesis Jamboree in the Event Space on May 5. The event featured five panels of students, who summarized their projects and fielded questions from the audience, followed by cake and refreshments. Special thanks to Prof. Juliet Fleming, Director of the M.A.; the M.A. Proseminar instructors Prof. Maureen Mclane, Prof. Elizabeth McHenry, and Prof. Thomas Augst; and graduate administrator Lissette Florez.

#1 Maggie McNamara discusses her master’s thesis

#2 Prof. Maureen Mclane, and M.A. graduate Lina Jiang

#3 Congratulations to the M.A. graduates

#4 Prof. Juliet Fleming, Director of the M.A., congratulates Nora Chesnut
SPRING M.A. THESIS PROJECTS

Mary M. Alcaro
"High (Plague) Anxiety: Reading the Specter of Pestilence in Late 14th Century British Literature" (advisor: Prof. Christopher Cannon)

Despite the widespread suffering caused by the Black Death in England in the years 1347-1351, very few contemporary descriptions of the plague exist. Yet the absence of explicit representation should not be taken as an absence of widespread psychological effect on the medieval population, and nor does it preclude more subtle forms of representation. Rather, the psychological scars and anxieties of plague are in fact represented in late 14th-century literature if we just know where to look for them. This thesis undertakes a search for representations of plague anxiety, for the ways that literature registered – implicitly and explicitly – the deep-seated trauma and cultural anxiety resulting from the Black Death from the mid to late 14th century. Focusing on Langland’s Piers Plowman, Chaucer’s “Pardoner’s Tale,” the Peal Poet’s “Cleanness,” and Julian of Norwich’s Showings, the thesis argues that allusions to pestilence by name, as well as allusions to physical representations of plague bodies are linked to God’s divine punishment for widespread sinfulness. All four of these texts reveal something about the long shadow the Black Death casts upon the experiences and subsequent writings of late 14th-century Britons.

Ciera Yvonne Baur
"Specters of State Formation: Irish Ghost Stories and National Trauma" (advisor: Prof. John Waters)

Julia Bolger
"A Pilgrimage of Reading: Time and Intertextuality in Piers Plowman" (advisor: Prof. Martha Rust)

Bailey Boyd
"Be More than Woman’: Navigating Sovereignty and Gender in Beaumont and Fletcher’s The Maid’s Tragedy" (advisor: Prof. Katherine Schaap Williams)

Nora Chesnut
"Epic Puberties: Male Coming of Age in the Works of Camões, Tasso, and Spenser" (advisor: Prof. Jane Tylus)

Morgan Chmielewski
"Machado de Assis and the Racial Politics of Global Literature in Midcentury America" (advisor: Prof. Paulo Horta)

Taylor Culbert
"All This Speech the Liuing Tree Had Spent’: Vocal Transcendence of Disguise in The Faerie Queene and Ben Jonson’s Court Masques" (advisor: Prof. Timothy Duffy)

Eman Elhadad
"Of Suns and Shadows: Transnational Solidarities in Palestinian Resistance Poetry" (advisor: Prof. Hala Halim)

Alexander Hajjar
"Postcolonial Hailsham: The Anxieties of Biotechnology, ‘New’-Humanism, and Education in Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go" (advisor: Prof. Toral Gajarawala)

Olivia Howard
"Black Like Me: Crafting the Empowered Mulatta in Frances Harper’s Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted and Danzy Senna’s Caucasia" (advisor: Prof. Elizabeth McHenry)

This thesis focuses on the development of black consciousness in two female protagonists, Iola Leroy and Birdie Lee. Set a full century apart, Iola Leroy (1892) and Caucasia (1999) both challenge American racial constructs through their protagonists’ development of a racial consciousness that privileges their cultural blackness over their phenotypic whiteness. They do so by exploring what happens when the characters make that choice, demonstrating the inherently ambiguous “two-ness” of mixed race consciousness that directly connects to W.E.B. DuBois’s definition of double consciousness as explored in his 1903 The Souls of Black Folk. This thesis explores how the challenges each of these women experience in crafting and claiming their “in between” consciousness ultimately proves to be a source of empowerment, offering a glimpse into a world that exists outside illogical binaries and within the shared complexities of human nature.
Samuel Humy
"The Amplification of Human Aggression: An Analysis of the Military-Industrial Complex in Gravity's Rainbow"  
(advisor: Prof. Josephine Hendin)

Lina Jiang
"I cannot forbear writing to you’: Mediating Love in Eliza Haywood’s Love in Excess" (advisor: Prof. Bill Blake)

It has been commonly yet perhaps mistakenly asserted by many critics that sentiments need no words or media especially in Eliza Haywood’s works in the early eighteenth century. However, this thesis argues that Haywood’s emphasis on the technology of writing as a literary device in her works highlights and demonstrates the inseparable relation between love and writing. Haywood is particularly interested in creating conflict and harmony through the act of writing in Love in Excess (1719–1720). This thesis analyzes how love is mechanized and mediated via “writing” in Love in Excess and suggests that Haywood connects the protagonist’s three-stage change with its relation to the function and consequence of writing—writing as an expressive tool, writing as influential power, and writing as anxiety.

Joshua Kruchten
"How to Read a Booke of Bees" (advisor: Prof. Sanam Nader-Esfahani)

Margaret McNamara
"(I Too Ezra Pound): Dos Passos, Pound, and the Lyric Reclamation of ‘Our Storybook Democracy’"  
(advisor: Prof. Peter Nicholls)

Oliver Treanor Miska
"Represent and Deploy: Refusing a Hero of the Cold War Closet" (advisor: Prof. Crystal Parikh)

This paper is concerned with a genealogical question: in what historical moment and under what conditions was the American homosexual subject positively incorporated by American biopower? I consider the U.S. state’s funding, regulation, and production of literature as an ideological “technique” for the subjectivization of a particular sexual identity. This paper thus examines the history of how homosexual literature becomes incorporated into the global project of liberal-capitalist modernity, especially the way in which the U.S government produces and regulates, through capitalist mechanisms of discursive production, homosexual literature, and literary culture. I trace the origins of an official, albeit covert, homonationalist cultural politics to the 1950s. Through archival research at NYU Fales and Special Collections and reading State-backed ephemera such as book reviews and literary criticism of Encounter, I think through the ways in which a particular aesthetics of the homosexual subject are incorporated into the project of US liberalism as early as the 1950s. Concluding with a close reading of James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room, I hope to rethink the “tragic fag novel” of the 1950s as also a genre of queer critique.

Sheila Raman
"Confronting the Dog-Man: Cynocephali, the Beowulf Manuscript, and Race in Late Anglo-Saxon England"  
(advisor: Prof. Haruko Momma)

Dylan Rogers
"The Future as Pictured by the Anglo-African Magazine" (advisor: Prof. Elizabeth McHenry)

Sara Scow
"Standing Up" (advisor: Prof. Thomas Augst)

This thesis examines stand-up comedy in a historical context compared to new media today. What is the significance of technology like Netflix, and how does it influence the genre of comedy and its format? Waves of comedy and stand-up comedy exist, forming a canon of comedic artists who all have fluid careers, one of which the thesis examines more closely among other contemporaries: Ellen Degeneres. She is not currently doing stand-up, but it was her start, and her work bridges classical older stand-up and new stand-up currently published weekly on Netflix. The landscape of stand-up is changing, and Degeneres found her success, in part, by performing material she believed in and upholding certain values which set her writing apart from that of other comics today. Her masterpiece Here and Now sets a high comedy standard technically, and the content shows exactly what she stands up for.

Betrearon Getachew Tezera
"(Dis)locating Douglass: Beyond the Narrative to the Ephemeral" (advisor: Prof. Elizabeth McHenry)
BOOK REVIEW: UNA CHAUDHURI ON THE STAGE LIVES OF ANIMALS

By Jordan Williamson

Earlier this year, Prof. Una Chaudhuri published The Stage Lives of Animals: Zoösis and Performance (Routledge). The book collects 11 of her essays from the last 15 years on animal studies and theater, along with an "Animalizing Interlude," Zoöpolis, "a collaborative project located at the intersections of urban theory, site-specific eco-art, and animal studies." On either side of the interlude are Prof. Chaudhuri’s essays, charting "the evolution of [her] term zoösis from its early focus on the figure of the animal to an increasing interest in the idea of species life, including the species life of human animals."

One of the chief pleasures of the book is watching this evolution. Prof. Chaudhuri defines zoösis in her preface as "the discourse of species in art, media, and culture." The term "echoes both Platonic poiesis and Aristotelian mimesis," but it is also "more directly inspired by gynesis, a term proposed in the 1970s by feminist theorist Alice Jardine to refer to "the putting into discourse of ‘woman’" in such a way that valorizes the "feminine, woman, and her obligatory, that is, historical connotations." Prof. Chaudhuri’s term, then, is a capacious one, aiming to encompass "the ways the animal is put into discourse: constructed, represented, understood, and misunderstood." Her term, she hopes, might contribute "to new modes of thinking and writing that would valorize the animal and bring a heightened ethical attention to human-animal relationships."

The book’s 11 essays nicely trace the increasing power of zoösis. Her earlier writings like "(De)Facing the Animals: Zoësis and Performance" and "Animal Geographies: Zoësis and the Space of Modern Drama" explore the use of the animal to establish the category of human at the expense of our ability to "face" the animal as an animal—that is, without anthropomorphizing it. The later essays, particularly "Bug Bytes: Insects, Information, and Interspecies Theatricality," "The Silence of the Polar Bears: Performing (Climate) Change in the Theater of Species," and "War Horses and Dead Tigers: Embattled Animals in a Theater of Species," turn to the "theater of species." The theater of species, another coinage of Prof. Chaudhuri’s, refers to theater that "create[s] a new awareness of and experience of human life as species life, a mode of being as fully defined by the material and biological factors of existence as by sociopolitical or psychological ones." In Tracy Letts’s Bug, for example, the "non-visual elements of theater," especially "those we associate with insects: vibration and sound," are manipulated to both "resemble and diverge" from the "spectator’s lifeworld"—the world as processed by a species.

The project of the theater of species is an urgent one: Prof. Chaudhuri sees it as critical that we "restage" the drama of our own involvement with animals "and give voice to the shared animality on whose recognition the future of so many species depends." This notion of urgency gives the book a welcome rhetorical charge: Prof. Chaudhuri a few times invokes the "laugh test" that anyone working in animal studies faces when asked about his or her work, but her essays make clear that this is anything but a laughing matter. In its most ambitious terms, her project involves the "destabilization, if not the overthrow of anthropocentrism," an increasing necessity in light of accelerating climate change.

Anyone interested in this project would do well to read The Stage Lives of Animals, as would anyone not yet familiar with animal studies. Overall, the 11 essays offer an easily digestible, if discomfiting, look at an emerging and important field of study. Part of what seems worthwhile about the book, too, is the way that it establishes something like the beginnings of a canon for the "theater of species," or just for animal studies, particularly in theater. The essays have all been published independent of each other, so there is the occasional overlap in primary and critical texts between them, but the book provides an important introduction to a unique body of literature, including The Goat by Edward Albee, Bug by Tracy Letts, Far Away by Caryl Churchill, and Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo by Rajiv Joseph, as well as art installations like Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson’s nanoq flat out and bluesome and Prof. Chaudhuri’s own collaboration with Marina Zuckrow, Zoöpolis. There is also, of course, a growing body of animal theory that Prof. Chaudhuri draws on helpfully, from initial contributors to the field like Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard, to contemporary practitioners like Jacob von Uexküll. Seeing this field come together, and especially reading Prof. Chaudhuri’s lucid and vital work in it, makes The Stage Lives of Animals an indispensable text to the ambitious project of animal studies. This book, in fact, makes the reader optimistic that we can find a more equitable and responsible way to exist on this planet with our fellow species, even as it outlines the difficulties we face in doing so.
Prof. Thomas Augst will become Chair of the Department of English in September.

Prof. Nicholas Boggs has been named writer-in-residence at the Moulin à Nef Studio Center in Auvillar, France. He will take up residency in August to continue his research on James Baldwin’s collaborations with artist Yoran Casac in Paris and southern France in the 1970s.

Prof. Carolyn Dinshaw has been awarded the 2017-2018 James Robert Brudner Class of 1983 Memorial Prize in LGBT Studies from Yale University.

Prof. Richard Halpern has published Eclipse of Action: Tragedy and Political Economy (Chicago). In September, he will become the department’s Director of Graduate Studies.

Prof. Phillip Brian Harper has been appointed Dean of NYU’s Graduate School of Arts and Science, effective July 1, 2017.

Prof. Julia Jarcho has published Writing and the Modern Stage: Theater beyond Drama (Cambridge) and a collection of three plays called Minor Theater (53rd State Press). Her play The Terrifying was produced at Abrons Arts Center in March; in his review of the play, Ben Brantley dubbed Prof. Jarcho a "queen of experimental mayhem."

In early June, Ph.D. student John Lindstrom was an invited nonfiction participant in the week-long Bread Loaf Orion Environmental Writers’ Conference. He also recently presented a paper on "Ecospherism on the Land: Fieldwork, Ignorance, and Ecological Creativity" at the biennial conference of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment.

Prof. Sylvia Marks presented a paper on “Frances Burney and Samuel Johnson: The Streatham Years” at the annual meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in April.

Prof. Paula McDowell has published The Invention of the Oral: Print Commerce and Fugitive Voices in Eighteenth-Century Britain (Chicago).

Prof. Perry Meisel has retired after more than 40 years of teaching in the Department of English. A scholar and critic, Prof. Meisel has written prolifically about literature, music, psychoanalysis, theory, and culture. His books include The Myth of Popular Culture, The Literary Freud, The Cowboy and the Dandy, The Myth of the Modern, The Absent Father, and Thomas Hardy: The Return of the Repressed. Most recently he co-edited, with Haun Saussy, Ferdinand de Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics.


Prof. Sonya Postmentier has published Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature (Johns Hopkins).

Prof. Martha Rust has published a co-authored paper (with L. R. Poos) called "Of Piers, Polltaxes, and Parliament: Articulating Status in Late Medieval England" in Fragments: Interdisciplinary Study of Ancient and Medieval Pasts [http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.9772151.0005.004]


M.A. student Emma Sarconi has been awarded the Hemingway in Idaho Research Fellowship for the summer. She will spend five weeks in Ketchum, Idaho, working with the collection at Hemingway’s former home; her research will culminate in a formal presentation and research project.

Dramatic Literature alumna Blair Simmons (’16) will take her play Staging Wittgenstein to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August. She wrote the play as an undergraduate under the guidance of Prof. Julia Jarcho and with the support of a DURF grant. See http://www.stagingwittgenstein.com/ for details.

At the MLA Convention in January, Ph.D. student Christina M. Squitieri organized and chaired a panel called "Antitheatricalism and Early Modern English Performance: 1500-1642" and also delivered a paper on "Enchanted Clothing and Twelfth Night’s Incomplete Ending.” At the NeMLA Convention in March, she organized two panels on early modern theater and presented a paper titled "Changing Tongues: Voice, Costume, and Transformative Performance in The Revenger’s Tragedy.”

Prof. G. Gabrielle Starr, Seryl Kushner Dean of the College of Arts and Science, has been named president of Pomona College, effective July 1, 2017.

M.A. alumnus Peter Tasca was awarded the 2016-2017 NYU Master’s Award for Academic Achievement in the Humanities in recognition of his thesis, “Savage Media: Jonathan Swift, The Drapier’s Letters, and the Poetics of an Irish Public Sphere.”

Rachael M. Wilson, Postdoctoral Lecturer in English, has published an article titled "Collocations on the Plane: Clark Coolidge and Philip Guston’s Poem-Pictures" in Textual Practice [http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2017.1310758].
CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR SPRING GRADUATES

MA GRADUATES
Mary Alcaro
Leah Becker
Julia Bolger
Bailey Boyd
Ryan Campagna
Nora Chesnut
Morgan Chmielewski
Taylor Culbert
Ashley Dun
Eman Elhadad
Michael Fridman
Alexander Hajjar
Cassidy Holahan
Olivia Howard
Samuel Humy
Lina Jiang
Joshua Kruchten
Mingyan Kwok
Alice Lesperance
Margaret McNamara
Oliver Treanor Miska
Elliot Morris
Kerishma Panigrahi
Timothy Pantoja
Shela Raman
Dylan Rogers
Sara Scow
Betrayan Getachew Tezera
Sheyuan Wang
Jessica Zisa

Ph.D. GRADUATES
Omar Miranda
"Romantic Exile and Global Culture"
(advisor: Prof. Maureen McLane)

Blevin Shelnutt,
"Print Capital: Broadway and U.S. Literary Production, 1836-1860"
(advisor: Prof. Thomas Augst)

Adrian Versteegh
"Writing the Sleepless City: Urban Insomnia and the Victorian Literary Imagination"
(advisor: Prof. Catherine Robson)

Millicent Bell Awards 2016-2017
The English Department's Millicent Bell Award recognizes outstanding master's theses each semester. Congratulations to this year’s winners, Kerishma Panigrahi and Ryan Campagna for Fall 2016 and Nora Chesnut, Eman Elhadad, and Cherrie Kwok for Spring 2017. Kudos as well to honorable mention recipients Sheyuan Wang, Cassidy Holahan, Mary Alcaro, and Margaret McNamara, and to nominees Leah Becker, Ashley Dunn, Oliver Miska, and Tim Pantoja.
THE BLOTTER TEAM

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