

Chair's Newsletter

Spring 2018

From the desk of Emily Apter
Department of Comparative Literature

I started this post in the Casablanca airport, jetlagged and trying to figure out the cause of a protest by a group of pilgrims having trouble getting on their flight. I was en route to the Dakar Biennial where I had the pleasure of being on a panel with **Manthia Diawara** (who made what turned out to be the controversial proposition that “art does not think”), and of visiting his exhibition “Exquisite Corpse” based on David Hammons’ recreation of a surrealist experiment of collating, accordion style, the texts and sketches of avant-garde artists. Dakar was the scene of amazing openings, parties, and pop-up shows scattered around the city that were indicated by red-bulls-eye icons as “les Offs.” I’d like to think of our department as an “Off” where people assemble, disperse and collaborate on experimental projects.

It was a busy year in the Comparative Literature department. **Zakir Paul** arrived as Assistant Professor and offered inspiring new courses in aesthetics, poetics and philosophy. He spoke about Proust and love in the Comparatorium work-in-progress series and published an engrossing interview with Samuel Weber on our website. **Todd Foley** joined as an Assistant Professor Faculty Fellow, joint with East Asian Studies, and introduced new courses with an animal studies focus. **Ato Quayson** and **Hent de Vries** became Associated faculty, adding rich cross-listed seminars to our curriculum in the fields, respectively, of tragedy in an African context, and continental philosophy (Heidegger), and as affiliates we welcomed **Orna Ophir**, **David Forgaçs**, **Peter Nicholls** and **Shirin Edwin**. This infusion has helped offset the departures of **Jacques Lezra** and **Kristin Ross** (both greatly missed), and blunt the impact of **Richard Sieburth’s** imminent transition to a life of full-time writing and translation in January 2019. We will sorely miss **Timothy Duffy** and **Eduardo Matos-Martin**, both visiting faculty members in the department for the past three years. Tim’s rigorous, wide-ranging, imaginative courses in early modern geographies of knowledge have been indispensable to our pre-1800 curriculum. We thank him for his brilliant and generous contributions to every aspect of life in

the department and wish him success and fulfillment in the next phase of teaching and writing. Eduardo Matos-Martin will shift his teaching locus at NYU to Liberal Studies. Like Tim, he has been a vital departmental mainstay, offering courses in Hispanophone transatlantic literature, politics and cinema. We wish him an interesting and productive new chapter and hope to see him at future department events and gatherings.

In marking passages and transitions of the year, we must also note in sadness the loss of our esteemed colleague **John Chioles** (1938-2018), a distinguished translator (most notably the Egyptian-Greek poet C.P. Cavafy), and specialist of Greek literature, theater and philosophy. John taught in the department from 1981 to 2011. He died on February 13, 2018. A moving obituary essay written by **Hala Halim** is published on our website and was delivered as a public homage on behalf of the department at an all-school faculty meeting.

as.nyu.edu/complit/about/news/2017-2018/honoring-john-chioles.html

On the programmatic front there were many highlights: **Hala Halim** and **Mark Sanders** were appointed co-directors of the new CALAMEGS Certificate [Comparative Approaches to Literatures of Africa, the Middle East and Global South], having guided it through the byways of administrative review. They experimented with a pilot seminar this spring, with guest lectures by **Ato Quayson**, **Fallou Ngom** from Boston University, and **David Forgacs**. Poetics & Theory Director **Avital Ronell**, together with Tom Bishop, jump-started the academic year with a moving tribute to Hélène Cixous called the “Cixousversaire.” It featured a star line-up of speakers, among them performance artist Karen Finley and Helen Cixous herself. On March 29 and 30, 2018, we hosted another international conference intriguingly titled “Specters of Kant, They Say / Spectres de Kant, dit-on” organized by **Gabriela Bastera** and **Ârash Aminian Tabrizi**. The program included Geoffrey Bennington on Lyotard, Olivia Custer on Derrida, Stefanos Geroulanos on Canguilhem, and Jean-Michel Rabaté on Lacan. Comp Lit partnered with the Humanities Center to bring Alain Badiou for a talk in November on “Philosophy between Poetry and Mathematics,” and the legacy of “May ’68 in Theory” was taken up by Patrice Maniglier, a French philosopher at Nanterre whose work focuses on the link between structuralism and the political “moment” of ’68.

We were especially thrilled to celebrate the publication of *Barricade*, a journal dedicated to “translating against fascism” conceived and produced by the Comp Lit graduate students. The

journal officially launched on May 12 at the Verso offices in Brooklyn, with Issue # 1 featuring an eloquent editorial introduction by **Amy Obermeyer** and a striking design/layout by **Andrea Long Chu**. The Comparatorium thrived with the help of **Gabriel Quigley** and **Sylvia Gorelick**, as did the Feminist Reading Group, now in its third year under the direction of Andrea Long Chu. Angela Haddad also initiated a CALAMEGS reading group with help from the English department. Congrats are in order to **Anastasiya Osipova**, **Mert Bahadir Reisoglu**, and **Michael Krimper**, all of whom defended their dissertations this year. We also salute all the graduate students, many of whom published, gave talks, started new reading groups, traveled to abroad centers, made and screened films, attended literature and theory programs around the world, and bravely shared creative work (a shout-out to inaugural readers **Lucy Ives**, **Daniella Gitlin**, **Wendy Lotterman**, **Sylvia Gorelick**, and **Christina Chalmers**). Additional graduate achievements to celebrate: **Ziad Dallal** received a job offer to join Bard College as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Arabic; Amanda Perry received an ACLS/Mellon Dissertation Completion Fellowship for AY 18-19; **Elizabeth Benninger** was awarded a Dean's Dissertation Fellowship for AY 18-19; **Emily Larsen Sibley** and **Michael Krimper** were on Mellon Dissertation Fellowship in the Humanities; **Daniella Gitlin** was interviewed in *Asymptote*, and Andrea Long Chu published the much debated "On Liking Women" in *n+1*.

On the undergraduate level, the student-edited journal *Brio* published two issues this academic year which included literary work by talented Comp Lit undergrads. **Gabrielle Reid's** senior thesis titled "The Semiotic Triangle: Mathematical Theories of Cognition in Kant, Maimon, and Novalis" won the Albert Borgman/Phi Beta Kappa Thesis Prize, and four departmental senior thesis prizes were awarded to **Anastasia Damaskou** (first place), **Zachary Lewis**, **Mark Sologuren**, and **Gabrielle Reid**. A Senior Thesis Summer Research Grant, meant to encourage thesis research, went to advancing junior **Colby Browning-Doorn**.

Faculty achievements were significant, and we will mention only a condensed and selective sampling (in alphabetical order). **Emily Apter** finished her first term as department chair, served as President of the American Comparative Literature Association, taught for six weeks at the School of Criticism and Theory and published *Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse and the Impolitic* (Verso). She was awarded an American Academy in Berlin fellowship for spring 2019. **Ulrich Baer** published an edition of Rilke's prose and

another volume on Rilke's letters. He served as Vice Provost for Faculty and Undergraduate Academic Affairs and directed the NYU Humanities Center. He also finished a book on academic freedom that will come out soon. **Gabriela Bastera** was an NYU Humanities Center Fellow where she worked on a book project titled *Kant in the Maquis' Backpack: Freedom in Spain's Resistance Movements*. She also became a member of the "Social Suffering" project at the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid. **Emanuela Bianchi** received tenure (!) and published several major articles. **Manthia Diawara** released a new film *An Opera of the World*, that screened at myriad international film festivals. **Andrea Gadberry** published "The Cupid and the Cogito: Cartesian Poetics" in *Critical Inquiry* which was named runner-up for the Malcolm Bowie Prize. **Jay Garcia** served as Director of Undergraduate Studies and ran the Honors Thesis program. **Hala Halim** guest-edited a special issue "Literature and Journalism" of *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* and was invited to serve on the Advisory Editorial Board of *Global South Studies*. **Avital Ronell** finished a book called *Complaint: Grievance Among Friends* and continued as director of the Poetics & Theory Certificate Program. **Mark Sanders** joined the *Connect Africa Research Network* and developed a new research project on puppets. **Cristina Vatulescu** served as Director of Graduate Studies and co-edited *The Svetlana Boym Reader* (Bloomsbury). **Xudong Zhang** also did a stint as Director of Graduate Studies and directed both China House and the International Center for Critical Theory in Beijing. Finally, our department administrators **Alyson Wild** and **Tara Hardy** deserve huge credit for their exceptional work on updating the department website and producing a weekly department Newsletter.

This record of the beat is necessarily incomplete but it will do for now as we end the academic year with a raised glass to **Richard Sieburth**, in tribute to his many years of extraordinary teaching and work in the department, and in anticipation of our continuing engagement with his witty, elegant translations; from Hölderlin to Benjamin, Baudelaire to Berman, Leiris to Labé, Blanchot, Roubaud, Nerval and many more.