

# In Theory



CORNELL UNIVERSITY  
FALL 2009

## A Word from the Director



**Amanda Anderson**  
*Caroline Donovan*  
*Professor of English*  
*Literature, Johns*  
*Hopkins University*

It is a great pleasure to reflect back on the 2009 session of SCT. First, let me urge you to read the excellent participant essays that follow, which collectively give a rich and varied sense of the kind of experience that SCT has to offer. They capture the diversity and intensity of the intellectual

life at SCT and convey the distinctive characters of individual seminars as well as the spontaneous relationships and dialogues that developed outside of the formal settings. As in previous years, we had a large and interesting mix of participants: we welcomed participants from fifty-nine institutions of higher learning, including sixteen institutions outside of the U.S. The international component of the school continues to be a source of its vitality, as does its interdisciplinary character. While SCT has historically had a strong number of participants in literature, we have participants each year from a range of humanities and social science disciplines. In 2009 we had representation from the fields of history, political

science, literature, history of art, religion, information science, philosophy, and music. In response to participant feedback, we are continuing our outreach to potential participants, in part by expanding our advertising venues for 2010. We also continue to rely on word of mouth and hope that alumni will recommend the program to interested colleagues. As in the past, we continue to benefit from well-established relationships with many leading institutions that sponsor participants annually.

Our six-week faculty in 2009 offered a set of dynamic seminars that were also fortuitously interrelated, which resulted in a vibrant collective debate about questions of theory and method in addition to more specific discussions about individual projects. Simon During (Johns Hopkins University), Geoff Eley (University of Michigan), Leela Gandhi (University of Chicago), Michael Steinberg (Brown University) and Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg (Brown University) all contributed enormously to the overall social and intellectual energy of the session, and I am very grateful to them all for helping to make the session so successful and fun. The six-week seminars were supplemented by compelling mini-seminars by Wai Chee Dimock (Yale University), Dominick LaCapra (Cornell University), Brian Massumi (University of Montreal), and Susan Stewart (Princeton University).

In addition, we were fortunate to have public lectures offered by two SCT senior fellows, Jonathan Culler (Cornell University) and Stanley Fish (Florida International University). The range of topics covered by the seminars, public lectures, and colloquia included topics in religion, politics, ethics, and aesthetics, with more specific discussions of liberalism, opera, fascism, lyric, poetic creativity, nonviolence, affect, genre, psychoanalysis, and the history of criticism.

The SCT session is known for its invigorating pace and its frequent social events, which offer numerous opportunities for enjoying excellent fare and conversation. This year was no exception. We held most events at the A.D. White House, including the opening Garden Party (with tastings of local wine and live music) and the closing banquet. Despite an inordinate number of rainy days, we neither cancelled nor moved a single outdoor event, and had glorious weather at the annual Fourth of July picnic at Taughannock State Park.

In what follows you will hear directly from participants about their SCT experience. I am reminded in reading these entries of the level of energy and commitment that each year's cohort of participants brings to the SCT. I also can't help noticing the chorus of appreciation throughout the newsletter for the quality of the staff and the many public events; I want to add my own thanks to Lisa Patti, the assistant director; Megan Dirks, the program administrator; Mary Ahl, the administrative manager; and Celeste Pietrusza, the administrative and events coordinator. The SCT would not be what it is without the extraordinary contributions of this stellar group.

Please take note of the line-up for 2010, listed on the following page. Full information about the upcoming session and the SCT can be found on our website (<http://sct.arts.cornell.edu/>)

## Annual SCT Reception at MLA

**The annual SCT reception at the MLA will be held on Tuesday, December 29th from 5:15-6:30pm in the Independence Salon III at the Philadelphia Marriott.** SCT is joined by the American Comparative Literature Association in sponsoring this well-attended event. Past or potential SCT participants have the chance to meet old, or make new, friends, and the SCT and ACLA groups share many interests. Former and future SCT faculty tend to stop by and the food and conversation make the event something to which former attendees look forward. We hope to see you!

2010 Summer Session  
June 13 - July 22

## 2010 Faculty 6-Week Seminars

### Timothy Brennan

Professor of Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, and English, University of Minnesota  
"Conformism, Antagonism, Critique: On the Post-Political Turn"

### Bonnie Honig

Sarah Rebecca Roland Professor, Political Science, Northwestern University and Senior Research Professor, American Bar Foundation, Chicago  
"Antigone in Contexts: Humanism and the Challenges of Democratic Theory"

### Saba Mahmood

Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley  
"Politics of Religious Difference"

### Timothy Murray

Director, Society for the Humanities; Curator, The Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art; Professor of Comparative Literature and English, Cornell University  
"Digital Discourse: Theory, Art, Archive"

## Mini-Seminars

### Stanley Fish

Davidson-Kahn Distinguished Professor of Law and Humanities, Florida International University  
"Academic Freedom"

### Saidiya Hartman

Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Women's and Gender Studies, Columbia University  
"Narratives of Dispossession"

### Katherine Hayles

Professor of Literature and Information Science, Information Studies, Duke University  
"How We Think: The Transforming Power of Digital Technologies"

### Michael Warner

Seymour H. Knox Professor of English and American Studies, Yale University  
"Sex and Secularity"

Applications from faculty members and advanced graduate students at universities worldwide will be reviewed beginning February 1, 2010.

For online application and program information: <http://sct.arts.cornell.edu/>

## SCT Alumni Network

Please help us keep in touch with SCT alumni. If you did not receive this newsletter at your current mailing address or if you would like to receive future mailings electronically, please send your updated contact information to Megan Dirks, Program Administrator, [sctcornell-mailbox@cornell.edu](mailto:sctcornell-mailbox@cornell.edu).

Please visit our website at <http://sct.arts.cornell.edu> and subscribe to our electronic events mailing list. We look forward to hearing from you.

# Reflections on SCT 2009

After spending six weeks at the SCT reading, interrogating, and problematizing theories about "voice," "representation," and "ideology," I harbor no illusions that I could—or even should—make this essay "speak" for a collective voice, "represent" what was fundamentally a multivalent and multi-medial experience, or distinguish my own subjective perspective from the ideological forces that shaped our discussions. I aim nonetheless to evoke the multitude of voices I heard this summer, to allow you to hear something of the brilliant, cacophonous polyphony that was my experience of the SCT.

On the first day of our seminar, "Voice, Representation, Ideology," co-taught by Michael Steinberg and Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, Michael said to the group, "The only thing that can ruin your summer is your superego." He meant, first and foremost, that we would be entering an environment in which intellectual dialogue would not be hampered by the pressures that can paralyze voices in other academic settings, that we could feel free to "speak" (or "not speak") to the extent we felt comfortable doing in each conversation. In short, we were about to enter something like an ideal scholarly realm, where we could participate in the most stimulating kinds of discussions with the most generous, broad-thinking, and interesting scholars—and all this without the anxiety that often accompanies situations in which academics are more explicitly judged. The focus here, the Steinbergs made clear, would be the critical intellectual exchange—and the two of them took part in that exchange, not as leaders in an antiphonal call-and-response, but as two threads in a counterpoint that, through thoughtful improvisation and impulsive experimentation, we all created together.

Our course brought together a diverse assortment of voices from the start. It served as a discussion forum for thinkers trained in the fields of Art History, American Literature, Comparative Literature, Creative Writing, English, French Studies, German Studies, Information Science, Musicology, Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Romance Studies. I have always considered myself an interdisciplinary thinker. Although I am pursuing a Ph.D. in musicology, I hold degrees in multiple fields in the humanities, and I am determined that my research will speak to people trained in diverse areas of inquiry. Still, it was not until this summer that I truly encountered the deep challenges and great rewards that accompany sustained and intensive interdisciplinary conversation. The topic of our conversations often turned into a pinball, bouncing off of each seminarian's comment, rebounding from field to field, skipping centuries and switching media, and rarely settling into a comfortable niche where we could examine it while it held still. But because of the highly dynamic nature of our discourse—the volatile leaps from idea to idea, and the challenges we encountered when we attempted to freeze our topic or texts for collective perusal—the gaps our voices had trouble bridging began to stand out. Moments of mis-communication proved illuminating; we were made to externalize and re-examine our internalized disciplinary assumptions, and found ourselves not only encountering, but suddenly apprehending, new ways of understanding familiar concepts.

In our multimedia seminar, we grappled not only with the disjunct voices we read in texts (Rousseau, Derrida, Dolar, Žižek, Althusser, and Butler, to name a few), but also with those we saw animated on projector screens (in the speech bubbles of comic strips), those we heard on audio recordings (singing Mahler and Wagner), and those we simultaneously read, heard and saw embodied on videos and in live performances of opera (Mozart and Verdi). Each of us was at some point an expert and at another a novice. The knowledge of this, I believe, freed each of us to expand upon the way we thought about our current research areas and to venture into new scholarly territory with less fear and more support than we would have found in almost any other academic situation. In those ever-shifting, uncontained and enthusiastic discussions with colleagues who hailed from twelve different fields, I became conscious of my relationship to my own discipline, as well as my intellectual commitments in general, in an entirely new way.



SCT 2009 Summer Session registration and picnic, A. D. White House garden

The conversations we began in seminar, already polyphonic, continued in ever more complex counterpoint outside the classroom. On the hilly campus of Cornell, in the large lecture auditoriums, and on the soccerfield (the latter amid cries of “We’re gonna deconstruct you!”), in the restaurants, bars, and dance clubs of Ithaca, at the waterfalls, farmer’s market, and local roller derby (the Ithaca Suffer Jets boast a player called “Snarl Marx”), from official SCT picnics to casual lunches at CTB and dessert at Madeline’s, our voices met with numerous others: participants who attended one of the other three seminars, faculty members who led those seminars, guest lecturers who visited and hosted mini-seminars, and even local Cornell faculty and graduate students who attended the public lectures, all of whom were equally eager to engage us in serious conversation about the topic of the day. As I suspect happens more often than not, themes from the diverse seminars and lectures, although not intentionally coordinated, converged in unexpected and fortuitous ways. The relationship between theory and politics, for example, seemed to be on everyone’s mind this summer, from those who inquired into the structural and historical nature of fascist violence, to those who argued for the respective virtues of liberalism and conservatism in the academy, to those who queried and debated the political efficacy of humanistic critical theory.

A spirit of lively, respectful exchange, serious commitment to critical dialogue, and actual interest in *listening* to others, pervaded the discussions whenever our various voices came together.

It is this last point that, it seems to me, represents the most significant dimension of SCT polyphony. As academics, we are trained to speak. We lecture to classrooms full of undergraduates, deliver papers at conferences, and refine our personal discursive strategies through seminars and roundtables with colleagues, constantly working to make our voices represent our ideas and our ideologies most precisely and eloquently. What was most striking about the SCT, however, was the willingness of this group of highly skilled, expert vocal soloists to listen with real intent to the voices of those around them. Such engagement requires more intellectual stamina, interdisciplinary awareness, and human generosity than many scholars are able, or willing, to give. At the SCT, our voices may not have blended into a perfectly consonant, unified choral harmony, but our polyphony was created through careful and thoughtful attention to the other voices. And for me, this made the SCT a singular academic experience—people listened.

Lynda Paul  
Yale University

I had expected to appreciate the School of Criticism and Theory for quite other reasons: I wondered, as I arrived in Ithaca, what it would be like to spend six weeks debating with doctrinaire Derrideans, or poring over elaborate geometric graphs with Lacanian cabals. But the pleasures of such inverse snobbery were denied me; there was, in the event, more literature to be found than dogma. The days of sages and disciples, if that was what theory was once about, are over. Instead I found myself part of a community of about ninety scholars from diverse backgrounds and nationalities, eclectic in tastes and rigorous in thought, all with new perspectives to offer. And the shift in perspective really is invaluable: in this community of critics, away from the familiar ecology of one’s home institution, one is offered new ways of seeing, new questions, new connections. It gets one thinking, even writing; an atmosphere of intelligent optimism pervaded the whole six weeks. Firm and lasting friendships were forged.

What was it that we did together? Simon During, at SCT’s final round-table event, suggested that SCT is a place where the canons of theory get set. Canons, as we know, can be used coercively, as a familiar form of Foucault’s ‘capillary power’, which promotes some agendas and renders others impossible. The canon can insist on being the only game in town. But another, perhaps more useful question to ask of canons – from national curricula to class reading lists – is this: what are the problems, the troubles or even the traumas, to which they propose themselves as therapy? Simon During’s class, ‘Conservatism, Religion, History’, in which I participated, addressed itself to what might be called the trauma of the contemporary perception, post 1968, that there is available no political alternative to democratic state capitalism. This is where, Simon proposed, a study of conservatism comes in. Are there, within a tradition historically defined against the advance of capitalism to be found, in Raymond Williams’ famous phrase, ‘resources of hope’? The course examined conservative thinking (which didn’t include contemporary American anti-statism, which Simon swiftly dismissed as a neoliberal free market economics with a petty bourgeois morality attached) by figures as diverse as Edmund Burke and Carl Schmitt, TE Hulme and Alasdair MacIntyre, to



*Yaron Aronowicz, a participant from Princeton University, Simon During, and Geoff Eley, with other SCT participants, at a weekly colloquium*

consider their critiques of liberalism, capitalism, and possible alternative modes of life. It was a challenging task, but the tone of the class made it possible; a playfulness and an affable rigour, a willingness to get to the bottom of things, and to keep the conversation going, whether over coffee or down at the pub, made it all work.

The lecture series, colloquia and mini seminars kept the stakes high. To draw a tentative thematic 'canon' from their recurring preoccupations, one might highlight a concern for the meanings of community and the forms of shared life. There seemed to be a sense that, although the gains made by identity politics mustn't be lost, a renewed attention to shared forms of life was required, whether in terms of aesthetics, or affect, or democratic procedure. Amanda Anderson led the way with a lecture that considered the potential of a liberal aesthetic. Simon During looked back to the origins of literary criticism to call for a revived ethos of socially engaged 'discrimination', as opposed to a self-referring 'ingenuity'. Leela Gandhi unveiled a rich archive of anti-statist communitarian philosophies of the love or hatred of objects in the British interwar years. Michael Steinberg traced the relationship of music to language. Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg and Geoff Eley examined the anti-communities of Fascism in Italy and Germany, through sophisticated psychoanalytic and historiographical lenses respectively. Dominick LaCapra reminded us of the care and

rigor required in discussing trauma and its possible therapeutics. Susan Stewart encouraged us to consider the phenomenology of creativity itself as a way of thinking about freedom.

There was much more, as a cursory glance at the programme will show. But one striking component of our intellectual community last summer was the way in which questions and answers were conducted. Questions were probing and incisive to a tangible intensity, but always impeccably civil. Testament, perhaps, to the Habermasian sympathies of SCT's new director, this atmosphere of collaborative dissent was as close to an ideal speech situation as I've ever seen.

The last word, though, must go to the staff at the AD White House: Mary Ahl, Megan Dirks, Lisa Patti and Celeste Pietrusza. Their flawless yet humane efficiency provides SCT's framework of possibility. The garden receptions, for my vote, are the keystone of the SCT experience, and they were always perfect; the food and drink were consistently excellent and – incredibly, for a period of six weeks – different every time. Everybody mixed at these parties with aplomb (the Steinbergs in particular were a social force), morale was high, hilarity frequent. Thanks to the whole SCT community. I couldn't have had more fun.

*David Russell  
Princeton University*

**W**ith apprehensions in my mind as it was my first time abroad I arrived at Cascadilla Hall. Clouds of doubt and anxiety intermingled with hope were writ large on my face. It came as a big surprise to me when a charming woman near the service desk asked, "You are Anu?" Of course I am, but how does she remember me out of 90 participants from all over the world! She extended her hand with a wonderful smile: "I am Megan." I was so relieved to find the person with whom I had been corresponding throughout and who had been so prompt and helpful all the way. The next step was meeting with the Director Amanda Anderson and the Assistant Director Lisa Patti at the reception area of the beautifully structured A.D. White House. What followed was undoubtedly the most memorable and enriching experience of my academic life.

When I saw the announcement of the SCT faculty for the 2009 session and came across the name of Leela Gandhi I knew then and there that I wanted to participate in her seminar, "On Anticolonial Metaphysics." At the first session of the seminar, I was struck by the heterogeneity of the group and the brilliance of the seminar leader. The democratic method and "interruptions invited" attitude always created an opening for more and more discussions. I had come to the seminar with doubts as to how metaphysics can be anticolonial, and I departed with an enlightened mind, stimulated by the ideas of great philosophers like Foucault, Hegel, Husserl, Derrida, William James, Agamben, Levinas, Heidegger, Bergson, Deleuze and many more. The work of Ian Hunter, Joseph Alter, and Susan Buck-Morss underlined the theme of the seminar.

The life blood of the seminar flowed mainly through its three nerves: metaphysics, ethics and politics. We discussed the position of the "object" and the "subject" in the orbit of metaphysical thinking as the key to understanding the anticolonial nature of metaphysics. Metaphysics should not only be understood as philosophy that transcends reality but as that which goes a step further in articulating the concepts of existence, object, causality, space and time. Pondering Heidegger's fundamental question "Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" led us to a consideration of being and

becoming. The attention to Indian philosophical thinking gave me a cushioned place, but there was much in that tradition that was new to me. The seminar reframed the work of Sri Aurobindo, Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Sri Ramana Maharishi, Mahatma Gandhi, Ram Chandra Gandhi, and Partha Chatterjee.

Equally enriching were the public lectures and the colloquia. Finding Jonathan Culler's name on the list of guest speakers had the same impact on me as finding Leela Gandhi's name on the list of faculty. Amanda Anderson's "Bleak Liberalism", Leela Gandhi's "After Utopia: Notes on an Ethics of Newness", Dominick LaCapra's "Fascism and the Sacred", Geoff Eley's "Where Are We Now with Theories of Fascism?", Simon Durning's "The Literary Humanities Versus the Managed University: Some Consequences for Theory" and Stanley Fish's "Milton and Theory" provoked moments of intellectual discourse that kept popping up, whether at the exciting picnic at the awe-inspiring Taughannock Falls or at the delicious receptions every Tuesday. What else could be more academically motivating than to see small groups indulging in hot discussions over some issue or idea mentioned at a public lecture, seminar or colloquium. Each and every event at SCT appeared to be selected carefully by the organizers to give all the participants the best intellectual experience in an intimate atmosphere. I take this opportunity to congratulate and thank the Director as well as all the others who laboured to make this intellectual event a memorable experience for all involved.

It would be difficult for me to forget the sprawling lush green campus of Cornell University that added to the academic exuberance. One cannot remain unfazed by Ithaca's glorious natural surroundings. The lake region is undoubtedly a natural delight and the Finger Lakes provide a motivating background for the six-week academic experience. The roaring sounds of Cascadilla Falls and the intertwining roads of the enthralling campus still stand out in my memory. I will cherish my time at SCT for years to come.

*Anu Shukla  
Chaudhary Devi Lal University, India*

The experience of the SCT intimated for me the old pursuit of an ideal form of living with others, a lifestyle alternating collective rituals and solitary recollection. As with all such communities, there is something utopian about the summer school at Cornell, about the balance one might be trying to strike between attending scholarly events – seminars, lectures, colloquia – and the desire, rekindled on each of these occasions, to find the time to read and reflect in the quiet of a library; between enjoying the company of so many interesting people and the necessary decantation of impressions; between listening well, willing – at least sometimes – to remain silent and allow more time for ideas to sink in, and articulating one's reactions eloquently so that a dialogue becomes possible; between watching the films screened on campus, attending an opera or theater performance, and hiking the gorges... There is, indeed, something implausible about compressing so much in a few weeks, and yet having no sense of closure at the end.

It is hard, in retrospect, not to see everything through the lens of the last day's roundtable discussion, during which most of what had been said over the previous six weeks was neatly mapped out: the stakes of theoretical work in the present political circumstances; the emergence of non-, anti-, or post-political projects; the status of literary studies in the context of a larger "crisis of the humanities;" the paradox of a persistent, albeit more eclectic than ever, engagement with ideology critique, contemporaneous with a "return" to the specifically literary. The synthesis offered by Amanda Anderson was a reassuring, meaningful gesture toward concluding a very rich session of the SCT; however, while immersed in the more feverish temporality of events themselves, engaged in conversations, hardly anything bore the mark of a conclusion: it all felt rather like the patient collective elaboration of an art of nuances, the weight attached to the topics discussed alleviated by the merriment that always seemed only a wink, an allusion, or a glass of wine away. Our coenobium was a "theater of the intelligence," in which the roles of host and guest were easily interchangeable, where all that seemed to matter was the presentation (or performance?) of knowledge and exchange of opinions. It is also fitting that MacIntyre's phrase raises the specter of possible antagonism: like the university he imagines, the SCT remained, from the first public lecture on the "way we argue now" to the concluding "long live the revolution!", unembarrassed by differences of views, by dissenting theoretical or political allegiances. It was thus fascinating to watch our faculty act both as lecturers and as respondents; to ponder the implications of questions or remarks in which echoes of previous discussions were discernible; to measure the stakes of fundamental disagreements.

Within the larger "theater," the seminar on fascism taught by Geoff Eley courted the genre of the happening: the degree to which the history class that we had expected was unconditionally hospitable not only to different theoretical approaches, but also to literature and film, never ceased to amaze me. I chose his seminar hoping to emerge with a more precise, straightforward understanding of the historiography of fascism, but our discussions often ramified in so many directions that by the end there were more



*Leela Gandhi lectures in Hollis E. Cornell Auditorium, Goldwin Smith Hall*



Michael Steinberg and Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg lead a colloquium

questions to ponder than definitive answers (questions each with substantial bibliographies of their own, enough to generate more than a few dissertations). Modernity and its discontents; the avant-garde and literary modernism; the specific historical context for the emergence of various fascisms; the critique of the *Sonderweg* thesis; the aestheticization of politics; the uses of psychoanalysis in theorizing fascism; colonialism and nationalism; space and imagined communities; biopolitics; trauma and the sublime; these and many others came up in various guises. We were challenged to think about our own investments in studying fascism, and unsettled by the injunction to own our fascination with it, in its potential reincarnations in contemporary culture; we were also alerted to use terms rigorously, to embrace a historian's nostalgia for the particular. Remarkably, I learnt as much from my colleagues as from our professor: seminar readings and conversations extended into hours of discussion with our reading group, and because the separation anxiety was too overwhelming at the end, we decided to meet again and share work at a conference next spring.

Weeks after my return from Ithaca, I am contemplating the meaning of associations which, who knows for how long, will remain for me inextricably attached

to the experience of the SCT: the process of "empathic unsettlement" explained in a seminar so enthralling that it seemed much too short; the ban on interpretation as an attempt to break with the rigid social structures of the past; the image of a child destroying his sandcastle as an expression of the "freedom of the maker"; the stunned silence on a dark porch after watching "Waltz with Bashir" with some friends on a laptop, or the musical phrases lingering in our minds days after the shared experience of "The Silence Before Bach"; the spellbinding erudition of a paper on metaphysics and the charismatic presence of its author; the fascinating travel stories of a fellow Ph. D. student who is also a kendo sensei and an investment banker; a daytrip to Cooperstown for the performance of *La Traviata* at the Glimmerglass Opera; the list could go on. *You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on.* Perhaps I'll only mention some rather eccentric additions to my vocabulary: traumatropism, philophusikia, stackability - scalability - switchability, and, of course, "brand theory."

My heartfelt thanks to the SCT organizers and to the faculty for the joys of a truly unforgettable summer.

Corina Stan  
Duke University

Ithaca is home – a place where a journey both begins and ends, where the old becomes new, the familiar becomes foreign. It is an uncanny place both of origin and return.

Beginning with these allusions to literature and theory is no attempt to be clever or original. In fact, I have the strange sense that if I were to look through the archives of this publication to see how past participants in the School of Criticism and Theory have attempted to articulate their experiences there, I would find that I am not the first to reference *The Odyssey*, or *unheimlichkeit*, or both together. By paying homage to Homer and Freud, and perhaps by unknowingly echoing expressions from the past, I am probably taking the risk of seeming ridiculously derivative. I hope so; that would affirm a set of beliefs I hold about the School of Criticism and Theory. Simply put (though this is anything but simple), I believe that even with its 33-year history, SCT is something singular, something I am now a part of, and something I can safely speak about. It is home to an intellectual community, somehow shared and strangely familiar, a space dynamic and unknowable enough to stimulate creativity, and secure enough to enable the risk of thinking out loud.

Such beliefs defy reason. This summer alone, there was such a diversity of brilliant and complex people there, with such a wealth of nuanced thoughts and feelings, that my mind should swell at the prospect of saying anything about it at all. Instead, trying to describe "theory camp" to those who weren't there, I find myself recklessly reciting a proliferating list of similar (but no less ineffable) experiences: "It's kind of like a cross between summer school, summer camp, an honor society, a really extended freshmen orientation week, an incredibly long academic conference, and a reunion with long-lost friends you haven't met yet." Perhaps this sense of abandon is an after-effect of my seminar. Despite spending six intense weeks studying the theoretical, ethical, personal, political, and aesthetic perils associated with speaking even for oneself, to say nothing of speaking for others, most of us in Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg and Michael Steinberg's "Voice, Representation, and Ideology" seminar spoke irrepressibly, both before and after the seminar itself. This irrepressible spirit echoed

through countless conversations outside of our seminar as well — conversations which were incredibly stimulating and seemingly constant. Moving easily but passionately among theoretical insights, political and academic debates, philosophical inquiries, and personal revelations, some of these conversations lasted until late at night, coursed through the entire program, and continue even now.

Yet amidst all that discussion and debate, there was surprisingly little in the way either of petty polemics and posturing, or conversely, of what Dominick LaCapra characterized as academia's debilitating "culture of deference." This is not to say that it was always comfortable or free of conflict. There were vigorous disagreements. But the vigor was engaging, even exhilarating. It wasn't aimed to silence opposition but to understand and be understood, to give voice to as many sides of an issue as possible. Such earnest engagement even extended to voicing as many sides of *oneself* as possible. So often, trying to reconcile the roles required by life as a scholar — roles of student and instructor, for example, or philosopher and professional — results in an awkwardness and alienation that stifles the exchange of ideas. Especially among self-reflexive graduate students versed in critical theory, this inhibition is so common that it is almost a rite of passage. For this reason, the intellectual courage I saw at theory camp was especially inspiring, as was the pervasive spirit of encouragement and acceptance.

Inspired by that spirit, I want to offer some personal thoughts here on the theme of Ithaca, home, and an academic life. I risk one last thought, then: that my own experiences will resonate meaningfully with the experiences of others. This is a risk sometimes less hazardous than we fear, and I hope that will be the case here. Knowing many of my fellow participants as I do, I trust I will hear about it if I am wrong.

For me, to say Ithaca is home is more than a literary allusion; it is a literal one. I was born in Ithaca. It is where my mother was from, where her mother was from ... as far as I know, it is where all the women in my family have always been from. But Cornell is not the Ithaca I knew growing up, and indeed I spent the greater part of my childhood living far from it. For

me, Ithaca was never a place of gorges, waterfalls, and lofty thoughts on the hill. It was the place my mother repeatedly escaped and to which she repeatedly returned, a place of trailer parks, tractors, and cornfields, a place of extended family and estrangement. But it was home, in a way. "Cornell," on the other hand, was a place I never went. It was figured as magical, utopian, and exclusive, reserved for the rich, or at least, I thought, for those who knew the magic words that would part the mountain on route 13, and someday allow me to pass through the exit to "Cayuga Heights," a place not far from Pyramid Mall, but even higher up.

These early romantic musings may explain in part why I was drawn to an academic life, and paradoxically, perhaps they explain why I have never felt entirely at ease amongst the educational elite. Back then, "Cornell" (or "college" in general) was a utopian fantasy, too perfect and exalted to admit disagreement, and too exclusive to admit mistakes. In my childish daydreams, it was a place to escape the real world. Now, having spent much of my life in institutions of higher education, I know that they are indeed part of the "real world." I also know that the real world admits no escape, and that mistakes must be risked for the sake of creative and productive thought.

And yet, what I appreciate most about the School of Criticism and Theory is that it returned me to some of those idealistic notions about academia that have always been so sustaining for me, even while it revealed them in a new light. For one thing, Cornell's campus really is as beautiful as one could imagine, and all the sunsets that many of us watched together while sitting high above Cayuga Lake did create a strong sense of living in a world apart. More important than its natural environment, though, is the social and intellectual environment that we had there, which was just as beautiful. Together, we found and tested our voices, learned to speak simultaneously as students, scholars, and colleagues, and practiced integrating the personal and professional aspects of academic life. For all these reasons, I think of SCT as a place where scholars come to learn to feel at home in academia.

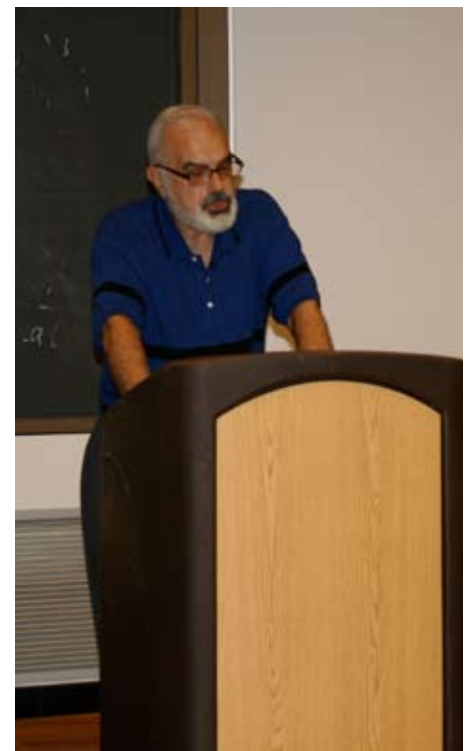
That these admittedly utopian beliefs I hold about theory camp defy reason

doesn't necessarily invalidate them. Home, too, is a utopia, a "no place"; if we have had luck early in life, perhaps it is a no-longer place. But it isn't simply in the past. It's something that can be felt in the present, that allows us to feel that our differences are appreciated, and thus to feel inspired to speak about those differences rather than to hide them in fear of rejection. It is also a place that can orient us to the future; home is not where we live now, but a place we occasionally long for, where we are no longer or not yet, but nonetheless somewhere we belong. Not simply a stable origin, then, it is an unstable destination, one that changes as we do, but where we feel safe despite those changes, sometimes a bit alienated upon return, but always welcome.

In the end, I am no longer so afraid of seeming utopian. How could I overstate the benefit of the plain fact that those long-lost friends I didn't know yet are now future old friends and colleagues, who it will someday be good to see again? Because of them, the world of academia seems much smaller, and homier, than it used to.

*Mona Bower*

*University of California, Berkeley*



*Dominick LaCapra lectures in HEC Auditorium*



Amy Villarejo, Chair of the Department of Theatre, Film and Dance, Cornell University, and Amanda Anderson at an SCT Reception



An SCT Reception, A.D. White House Garden

I am afraid of the dark. In Ithaca I sublet the converted parlor-room of a big, dark old house, where I lived alone for a week before the other tenant arrived. I avoided getting out of bed at night, but if I absolutely had to travel across the unfamiliar house in the dark I held my glowing cell phone ahead of me like a torch.

But it was in broad daylight while I was sitting at my sun-bathed desk one afternoon that my newly arrived summer housemate came up behind me out of the blue and plainly spoke my name, causing me to bolt out of my chair and send it wheeling across the room. I was completely spooked, which spooked her; we scurried to our respective quarters and two days passed before we would even speak to each other again.

I was similarly defamiliarized by my initial dip into SCT itself. At our very first BBQ in the garden of the A. D. White House, I tried my best to mingle and look approachable but kept succumbing to the mild panic that attends meeting over eighty new people at once. I resorted to my cell phone again, this time to consult it with deep focus as if I'd just received a very important message.

So it was with no little sense of relief that I assented to our seminar leader, Leela Gandhi, when on the first day of class she entreated us to be amateurs. She was invoking "An Immature Politics," the artful coda to her most recent book, *Affective Communities*, where she champions the immature subject's earnest impatience, her knack for improvisation, the immediate contingency of her moves. To undertake political and intellectual engagement with the ethos of immaturity, she writes, is to "render[ ] politics into a performance of strange alliance, unlikely kinships, and impossible identification" (184). We set precisely such a course for the intellectual work of our seminar, expectantly tempting the strange, unlikely, and impossible to happen as we fashioned connections among the thinkers the syllabus articulated and among each other as new friends.

Framed in this way, metaphysics shows itself to be a fundamentally immature undertaking. A philosopher's "'parenthesizing' of the objective world" (25), to borrow a theme from Edmund Husserl, takes nothing for granted, interrogates the commonplace with energy and urgency. I delighted in this freedom of inquiry, feeling also that the stakes were not insignificant. We were discursively exhuming the paranoid, the idealistic, the unregimented, the utopic--creative forces that struggle under the weight of calcified power. Metaphysics allowed us to "parenthesize" the logic and effects of empire and dwell instead on the most basic building blocks of anti-violent thinking and being.

I think many of us carried this spirit of immaturity with us at large throughout SCT. It was an important stance for me to take as a twentieth-century Americanist immersed in what was a predominantly European-orientated curriculum this summer. Often the questions I found most productive begged for basics: why should eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and continental writing be brought to bear on contemporary U.S. politics? What do we hope to achieve by debunking "identity politics" in the midst of a cultural field in which identity is so operative? Do we exhaust theories and put them to

rest, or do we heed a theory's demand for methodological re-orientation, according to the shifting imperatives of place and time? Questions like these asked participants to describe the metaphysical world from which we were speaking. This sometimes shored up fundamental differences, but more often revealed a surprising sweep of common ground and shared commitments.

Eventually I located all the light switches in my house in Ithaca; soon after I could find my way around in the dark and didn't need the switches at all. And after two days of dodging one another, my housemate, a first generation Korean-American novelist and teacher, finally asked a question about laundry options, and before long we were at Cafe Dewitt making sense of exactly how ideally matched we were. We trusted each other because we'd had the same immature response upon our first encounter--to run and hide until we'd improvised a plan of action.

As things settled at home, I saw also that a groove was taking hold at SCT. It was at a BBQ and poetry reading in one participant's backyard that things finally seemed to have gelled. After a perfect afternoon of grilling fresh stuff from the Ithaca farmer's market, we waited out the evening in thickening clouds of mosquitoes to hear each other's translations of our favorite poems and our own writing, practiced and amateur. It started out awkward and geeky, everyone encouraging everyone else to take the first plunge. Eventually we were reciting anything and everything we loved. I even read a poem off my cell phone. There is a sincerity to an immature way of being that serves as a profoundly good foundation for intellectual fellowship. I'm grateful to SCT and Ithaca for providing such a safe space for the eager amateur.

Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006.

Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. 1950. Trans. Doris Cairns. Norwell, MA: Kluwer, 1999.

Roy Perez  
New York University

When I was a kid my mom worked in a university. She was a secretary to some professor of Middle Eastern History. It didn't pay much, apparently, but there were lots of perks. Every summer, for example, I went to a day camp at the university. All the kids in the camp were children of secretaries. We walked around the campus in our blue uniforms and chanted together rhymes about brotherhood. Sometimes, when we got tired, we would hide under the desks between our mothers' legs. I remember that in the professor's office there was a huge map of the Middle East. I used to lie under the map letting my eyes travel among unfamiliar names that eventually became all too familiar, yet still out of reach. The professor himself, as was to be expected, was usually abroad – in America, maybe, even in Ithaca perhaps. In the afternoon, as the Tel Aviv heat relented a little and the buildings around us turned orange, we gathered in one of the lecture halls and played *Makbilat HaMochot* – an Israeli copy of the British television show *Mastermind* (which, by the way, was inspired by Gestapo interrogations); the Hebrew name of the game conjured up images of parallel minds that can never actually meet and attempt to suppress each other physically, just as your opponent in chess is vanquished when his king falls even though you did not touch it. During those games, with any question asked, there was a sensation of tranquil reflection touched by waves of smiles around. This was my favorite part of the day. Last summer, at The School of Criticism and Theory, I remembered that summer camp vividly during precious hours of emotional and intellectual enjoyment.

The expansive lawns that can be seen from the windows of Olin Library form a generous backdrop for contemplation as you spend six weeks reading about Fascism. At the library café, you can have some coffee and a homemade cake to satisfy your neglected physical hunger and, perhaps more importantly, provide yourself with an alibi for random yet highly fruitful encounters with fellow members of the SCT. Then, as time passes and these encounters become more frequent and intimate, you come to realize that the genuine and fundamental little questions of "our" "criticism and theory" begin to take form – a form that is more than mere speech, and speech that is more than mere theory.

And talking we did, incessantly and about every topic under the sun: the so-called *state of emergency* in India during the 1970s; Eugene O'Neill and Communist plays that drag on for six long hours; American Gothic cinema; redemptive science fiction; phenomenological freedom in poetry; opera and Fascism, Fascism and religion, religion and conservatism. But it wasn't just "empty talking", you know, and you listen and feel a compulsive need to hear some more, to speak some more, to have some more beer and, suddenly, one of the guys from our community is deejaying and you find yourself on a dance floor in some downtown club at four in the morning like *A Voice and Nothing More*.

The seminar, "Fascism, Modernity, Politics, Aesthetics," starts right after breakfast. Geoff Eley sits down and, on the seat next to him, places his worn black canvas bag with a shining Chinese red star patch. Eley, a real historian, as he made clear for us literary theorists, begins by asking: What is Fascism today? Following his disciplinary bent, he delves into history records and we discuss that disease known as *war* as it manifested itself over the sick twentieth century – the century that ended with Bush and Ariel Sharon. How symbolic, then, that we all sat there – an Englishman and an Estonian, a German, an Italian woman and a Spanish woman, a Swedish man, a Romanian woman and a Japanese woman, several Americans, and one Israeli. Although we haven't come up with an unequivocal answer (*in practice as in theory*), you still have this vague sense that if we'd been running the show then the century would have looked different. Then, what would we have to talk about now?

Brian Massumi, who offered one of the session's mini-seminars, would find something to talk about, for sure. Even during his lecture on American pragmatism some stranger suddenly crept into the talk and became the opposite of him – a "me" of *his*. If you don't understand try to feel. According to Massumi it works. From my own experience it's a tough call; after all, writing it down as a rational quest will be just the typical hunt for traces.

Yet perhaps this summer we found something which is exactly that: a beautiful, aspiring, responsible group of people, full of passion for this lonely profession we have chosen.

A fastidious group, to be sure, and nowhere more so than around the buffet table at the Andrew Dickson White House. If you've never been in the building, here is a good reason to send in an essay and transcripts and walk around these inspiring nineteenth century corridors – from Megan Dirks' office to Lisa Patti's office before eventually, perhaps, settling in Amanda Anderson's office and allowing her to explain how it's all done.

Elad Anlen  
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

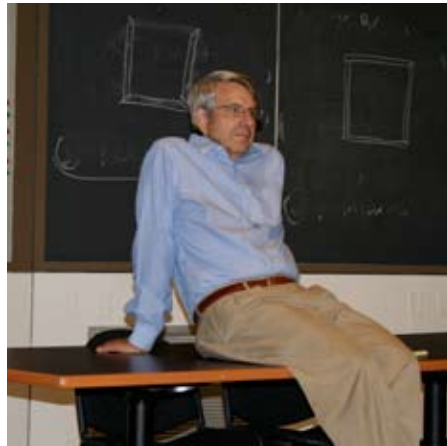


Wai Chee Dimock, Brian Massumi, and Stanley Fish lecture in Hollis E. Cornell Auditorium, Goldwin Smith Hall

**W**e're increasingly comfortable with how gatherings, now, envelop us virtually well in advance of their beginnings, and never really end, but instead linger on in a virtual afterlife. Long before the first actual people make their way into a gathering (tentatively, since they are the first, until a few of them encounter each other face to face and the gathering is begun in earnest), feelers have been emailed, evites established, listservs organized, or facebook groups founded. And whether the gathering in question is an impromptu party, a solemn ceremony, or a School of Criticism and Theory, its virtual life, together with its face-to-face incarnation, follows on from a patient project of administrative assemblage that envisions it complete before its beginning, begins it again, in effect, before it ends, and tends all the while to its spirit, whether online or, say, in a newsletter.

I knew all this, or thought I did, and yet I found it an unexpectedly informative, entertaining, and even moving experience to have a front-row balcony seat for the 2009 SCT's instantiation of this ritual cycle of postcontemporary institutionality. I arrived at the A.D. White House, I should explain, more than a year before most of my SCT cohort did; in May of 2008, fleeing the triple-digit heat of a central Texas summer for Ithaca, and anticipating a fellowship year at Cornell's Society for the Humanities. I knew it would be months before I would be working in the White House but, thinking I'd get the lay of the land, I climbed an unexpectedly hot and steep hill, entered an unexpectedly cool and dark mansion, and found at the desk within an unexpectedly wonderful person whom I hadn't heard of before, Megan Dirks.

As I walked back down the hill, my most exciting new possession was the program of 2008 SCT talks, occasions that would be highlights of the summer ahead. Long before, as an undergraduate in 1990, I'd been able to hang around an SCT session at Dartmouth, working on a grant with Jonathan Arac while he taught a seminar. And now once again, but from a very different perspective, I enjoyed watching graduate students and faculty gather to make an event out of their desire to share thoughts; and (somewhat to my surprise) I found hearing for instance Haun Saussy and Beth Povinelli outlining their projects



*Jonathan Culler moderates questions after Susan Stewart's lecture*

to be no less compelling an experience than that original baptism into theory had been.

As the summer turned to fall and the fall to winter, I was swept up by the Society for the Humanities investigation of "Water: A Critical Concept for the Humanities," but I remained aware of the work concurrently being done to prepare SCT 2009. One day I'd see newsletters going out; another day I'd overhear talk about seminar leaders and applications; and always I'd be impressed by the cheeriness, competence, respect for boundaries and insistence on intellectual criteria I was everywhere finding characteristic of A.D. White House undertakings. When it was suggested that I might enroll in the SCT for the coming summer, I couldn't resist the opportunity to finally avail myself of the full experience of the program. (That doing so would also provide me with an excuse to put off returning to Texas until after the height of the summer played only a small role in my decision.)

Soon my fellow Fellows were departing the White House, and the SCT participants arriving, all of them, unlike me when I had arrived, already well acquainted, albeit virtually, with the managerial aplomb of the liaison whom they would forever denominate with her entire email "from" line: "Megan Dirks." I had watched Megan help Lisa Patti manage the School's initial, virtual gathering from the White House; and yet I felt trepidations as the SCT slowly transformed into immediately present people and conversations, perhaps because I was so aware of the care with which these seemingly random meetings--our encounters with each other and with ideas--had been organized. And no doubt also it is hard for anyone, however experienced, to arrive at such a gathering and not pose to theory itself the theorist's rhetorical question: "Are we beginning all over again to produce our credentials? Do we, like some people, need letters of introduction to you, or from you?" At SCT, everyone must once again find words to introduce themselves to one another and to their subject; a happy, but also a scary, threshold to pass.

For the theorist I have just quoted--a trendy thinker these days, arguably the hottest theorist around--we can find the introduction we seek addressed within us: it is "all the letter we need, a letter written on our heart; anyone can see it for what it is and read it for himself." One recognizes all kinds of problems with such logocentric claims for self-sufficiency, and yet for me this formulation well articulates the experience I had at SCT of hearing so much sincere and thoughtful testimony from a community reflecting on the common commitment to the truth that brought it together.

Now, this theorist, being St. Paul, goes on to specify that this truth, "written not on stone tablets but on the pages of the human heart," is "a letter written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God." On this point most of Paul's contemporary theorist readers will part company with him. Still, the argumentative force of my seminar, Simon During's course "Conservatism, Religion, History," was to body forth the conjecture that some such mimetic faculty may exist, even if it is not the Holy Spirit, and that the

Left might do well to avail itself of this faculty, following in that if in little else a path blazed by the Right. The SCT is of course a secular institution, and I am hardly a believer in either the Christian Bible or for that matter in taking as gospel the works of the thinkers whom Dominick LaCapra enjoys calling "the ABZs of Theory": Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek. Yet what we learned (or relearned) from Simon over the course of the summer was the urgent interest of theology—for instance, of the Pauline conception of the event, as explicated by

Badiou—for those who would imagine social transformation in days to come.

With this theory of practice, we also took away a practice of theory. Speaking for myself, my summer SCT experience confirmed for me that theory becomes most revelatory when it commits itself to generous patience with the thought of the other—of even so other an other as a conservative, especially since conservatism is a species of alterity so uncannily enmeshed in our own institutions and problematics. My longer acquaintance

with the SCT, meanwhile, renewed my regard for how mundane attentiveness to administrating well can transform the quality of our encounters with such an other, and with each other. Alas, these practical lessons are the difficult ones to, well, put into practice—which has me hoping to continue communing with others who shared my SCT experience, and who may help me enact these truths on which I reflect.

*Samuel Baker*  
*University of Texas, Austin*



*Geoff Eley and Amanda Anderson with SCT participants at Taughannock Falls*



*SCT participants enjoy the annual barbecue at Taughannock Falls Park on Cayuga Lake*



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