

THE BLOTTER

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THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT'S NEW CREATIVE WRITING TRACK

CYNTHIA DE LUNA

NYU's English Department has churned out numerous talented writers over the years. This year, however, the program has taken up a new commitment to integrating students' specifically creative interests into the current English major through its new Creative Writing Track. While students have often turned to the Creative Writing minor outside the English Department to develop their creative talents, current English students can now also foster those talents through the English Department's offerings.

The Creative Writing Track within the English Department extends the now-named Literary Studies Track in a way that allows students to approach literature and writing from a new perspective, one that asks them to consider the relationship between critical and analytical thinking and creative practices. Like the Literary Studies Track, the Creative Writing Track requires the four core courses (Introduction to the Study of Literature, formerly called Literary Interpretation, British Literature I, British Literature II, and American Literature I). The Creative Writing Track also requires a fifth course alongside these four, the Reading as a Writer course, which debuted this semester in two sections: Faculty Coordinator Professor Nicholas Boggs' "Queer Literature" and Professor Maureen McLane's "Poetry, Hybrid Genre, Creative Encounter."

Reading as a Writer acts as a gateway course in which students approach reading with an emphasis on questions of craft, and it will be offered once again next year.



Professor McLane's section of Reading As A Writer on a visit to the La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela Dream House



Marcel Broodthaers, "Parle Ecrit Copie" (1972-1973)

over the course of the semester, and interested students are encouraged to approach possible advisers as soon as their ideas have begun to develop; members of the faculty who are active creative writers include Professors Boggs and McLane as well as Professors Julia Jarcho, Tomas Urayoán Noel, and Lytle Shaw. "We are especially pleased," adds Professor Boggs, "that Jess Row, a notable fiction writer who was just awarded a Guggenheim, will be joining us for the 2016-2017 academic year, during which he will teach a section of Reading as a Writer and serve as adviser for a number of capstone projects."

The return of a creative writing track within NYU's English Department offers current and prospective English students a chance to take on literary studies in a way that allows them to use and hone their critical, analytical, and creative skills concurrently. It will provide students with a new way of looking at texts, one that pushes the English program further and challenges students to take on literature with a different set of skills.

WORKING TOO HARD, HARDLY WORKING:

SIANNE NGAI DELIVERS GOLDSTONE LECTURE ON THE THEORY OF THE GIMMICK

ANDREW SCHLAGER

Sianne Ngai, Professor of English at Stanford University, delivered the annual Goldstone Lecture on Wednesday, March 22nd, 2016. Students and faculty gathered to listen as the prominent literary critic and affect theorist shared an excerpt from her current book project, *Theory of the Gimmick*. As NYU English Department Chair Christopher Cannon explained in his introduction, the Goldstone Lecture is endowed by a no-strings-attached gift from the late Professor Richard Goldstone. The department decided to use his donation for a lecture to be delivered by the scholar “in the profession from whom we’d most like to hear,” and Ngai’s lecture attracted an eagerness and a buzz worthy of such a charge.



Ngai began by noting the strange mingling of revulsion and attraction that (hall)marks our aesthetic response to the gimmick—a phenomenon that, given its habitat on the underbelly of seriousness, seems to align naturally with Ngai’s other work. Citing the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of “gimmick,” Ngai noted how its entry initially places the gimmick in the material objective realm, as a thing, a device, a trap, or a contraption, but then slowly, clause by clause, abstracts away—so that the gimmick is always an idea, too—a concept as well as a thing. Ngai argues we feel this union of the material and the conceptual as a negative convergence, the gimmick offering up the abstract in the concrete. During the Q&A that followed, one attendee observed that when we talk about an artist’s “thing” (“The intimacy of violence is like, Scorsese’s thing”), we very subtly note the objectified scene of the gimmick’s crime. As a point of comparison, Ngai distinguished the capitalist *gimmick* from the modernist literary *device*, best emblemized in the Brechtian laying bare of machinations, or making visible the production of an effect or surface. This modernist device Ngai sees as adding value to an aesthetic experience, whereas the gimmick’s foregrounding of production devalues the object, such exposure and transparency debasing as opposed to complicating its worth.

The irritated sense that the gimmick is both conceptual and material, both trying too hard and not trying hard enough, both saving time and wasting time, keys into a number of the antinomies of the gimmick that Ngai worked through in her lecture. The gimmick saves labor as it wastes labor, is both outdated and newfangled, appears as a dynamic event and as a static thing, occur singularly, never to be repeated, and yet is exhaustively repeated. The gimmick shuttles between these contradictory poles. The gimmick eschews, forbids, is two sizes too big for the synthesizing machinations of the dialectic, and is instead formed, as Ngai suggests, like the parallax, as a resulting angle between and not reducible to two fixed positions.

At its heart, the gimmick embodies the antinomies of Capitalism, and the economics of the gimmick, as a value conserver and waster, as a labor saving device that works overtime, reproduces the central material contradictions of our economic system. The capitalist gimmick converts its exploited labor into an aesthetic cheapness that, like the commodity, both seduces and repulses.

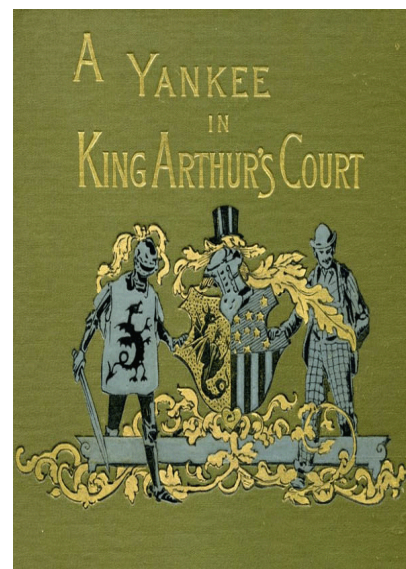
For a portion of the evening, Ngai directly theorized the gimmick, but she also engaged with a number of imaginative texts that both reflect on and in some sense function as gimmicks. Ngai treated Mark Twain’s 1889 novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* and Helen DeWitt’s 2011 novel *Lightning Rods* as central to her own theorization of the gimmick, and by making contemporaneous two works separated by over a century, Ngai performed the very perpetual present tense conjured up by the gimmick itself. Ngai reads Twain’s novel as a kind of “bad infinity,” where the narrative falls of into a series of gags. Honing in on a moment in the novel where a character retells an unfunny joke he’s told billions of times, Ngai concludes that the gimmick displaces its own contemporaneity and seems both behind and ahead of its audience.

Continued on next page



DeWitt's labyrinthine postmodern satire of temp agencies and sex workers exposes the capitalist gimmick's operation as not de-familiarization but re-familiarization—drawing back its gimmicky curtain only to reveal everyday truths. Unlike Twain's novel, *Lightning Rods* models the gimmick without becoming one, and exposes the sexual fault lines along which the gimmick treads, where women and temps are analogized as the ultimate capitalist gimmicks—cheap labor, undercompensated laborers who are profit protecting devices.

Afterwards, Ngai gracefully fielded questions from the audience, addressing *Moby Dick's* relationship to the gimmick, the gimmick of the novel of ideas, and patent law as a gimmick of futurity. With regards to the subjectiveness of the appellation “gimmick,” Ngai compellingly suggested that though she and her mother might disagree on whether a particular thing is a gimmick or not, her mother's explanation of what makes a particular thing gimmicky would align with her own. Someone even asked if the theory of the gimmick might help elucidate the rise of Donald Trump—though another audience member quickly warned that Trump's greatest triumph is that he *looks* like a gimmick, without being one, that he passes as a gimmick but packs a fiercer punch. Perhaps then Trump performs the gimmick as mere aesthetic category, such that his gimmick is his gimmick, his shtick, seeming like a shtick. For such a consideration, we'll have to wait for the publication of Ngai's book, which we all may hate to need as a bible for our times.



ENCOUNTERING ABSTRACTION

ANDREW SCHLAGER



A community of students, friends, and scholars gathered together this February at the NYU Center for the Humanities to celebrate, as the title of the series announced, a “Great New Book.” The particular work featured and discussed that evening was (Professor of English and Social and Cultural Analysis) Phillip Brian Harper's recently published *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (NYU Press, 2015). Professor Sonya Posmentier of the English Department moderated a conversation between Harper, Professor Michael Ralph of SCA, and Professor Anne Anlin Chang (Princeton). Each of the participants spent time thinking through Harper's engagement with visual, filmic and literary works that represent African American life while also featuring gestures of abstractionism. A photograph of a 2010 sculpture by Fred Wilson was the first object of Harper's analysis that evening. The piece in question featured a figure of an emancipated black slave, appropriated from the late 19th century “Indiana Soldiers and Sailors Monument” in Indianapolis, to which Wilson had added a large flag signifying black diaspora. Local residents were quick to denounce the publically displayed figure as a “negative image” of black life. Reading out from this and other examples, Harper noted

the way in which certain works of African American aesthetics—in particular, visual works—are met with a perpetual failure to register their abstraction, and it is this kind of response that provided Harper with his argument for the specific power of abstraction in *literary narrative*.

Months before the event, and before his book was officially published, I was lucky enough to sit down with Prof. Harper and ask him some questions about the origins of the project and its completion. This new book developed out of and drew its concerns from what he called a “very long period of worry.” He said there was no identifiable and single moment in which the book's arguments and analyses originated, but he did remember how seeing the 1998 sci-fi film *Dark City*, a film he was quick to flag as overrated, produced a very specific set of problems and questions that eventually formed his contentions surrounding abstractionism's place within African American aesthetic culture (I really suggest everyone watch the film's trailer. The remixed Gregorian chant and the nausea-green lighting are well worth it. And who doesn't want to see a young(ish) Kiefer Sutherland with his hair parted down the middle).

Harper summarized the film: "Aliens have inevitably invaded earth, and for reasons that remain pretty much inexplicable through out the film, [these aliens] are using human beings for various experiments they are running, which they conduct periodically, when the human inhabitant are sleeping, which is a state the aliens themselves put the human beings into." During these artificially induced sleeps, the aliens rearrange the physical environment, and transfer various people's beings or selves from one body into another.



A scene from "Dark City"

As Harper noted, with old irritation, "there were no persons of color in this movie at all, except there is one scene, very early on, in which a black man figures, and the only reasons he's there, the only reason a black actor was cast, is to make it clear to the audience that the guy sitting in this place where he's sitting—he's a hotel clerk, so he's sitting in the front desk of a hotel—is the same person we saw sitting at the desk, before the [alien's] rearrangement, except his race has changed, and that's our clue what the aliens are doing." This use of blackness as a "visual sign of the fact that a [narrative] shift has taken place," Harper reads as racial blackness and black people "being used instrumentally, as a kind of visual cue." This manipulation of blackness is integral to the communication of a story, and yet the story fails to include its black characters in its narrative. Harper identified this trend as symptomatic of the "mistreatment of black people in the realm of visual culture," and further pinpointed how they are treated when treated at all: "What made blackness utilitarian in visual culture? Are there comparable ways that [racial blackness] gets used in other aesthetic forms? In literature? And I didn't think so."

This instrumental use of racial blackness depends upon what Harper called a "principle of abstraction"; meanwhile, he also notes that a "longstanding antipathy towards abstraction... is characteristic of African American culture." But is abstraction always deployed in a deleterious function towards black people? Aren't there works of art which engage and mobilize abstraction in a socially progressive way, and furthermore, activate a kind of social critique foreclosed on by a resistance to abstraction *tout court*? What do abstract works of African American artistic production look like, and how do popular discourses assimilate and receive its aesthetic? Harper holds a joint appointment in the English and SCA departments, and in conversation he was quick to account for the potentially disparate pulls of each discipline, and how each informed his work. He maintained that this project had a pronounced "interest in aesthetics," but that he did use certain "social events in the world, mostly public controversies about African American art" to contextualize the various mediums he wrote about. For instance, his reflections on the artist Kara Walker's silhouettes, which debuted in the 1990's and faced charges of hyper-sexualization and negatively depicting black people, account for the public controversy surrounding her work, as well as the internal aesthetics of her work as such.

Though Harper was trained as a literary scholar, a "professional reader," as he likes to say, this project took him across mediums into the genres of jazz music and, as glossed above, contemporary art. This is not the first time Harper has moved outside of the discipline of literature. He recognized examples of abstract African American fiction in the experimental prose of John Keene, and, through a lucky encounter (Harper claims to work with the "principle of serendipity") began to explore the abstract qualities of Louis Armstrong's music: "Once I knew that I was writing about problems surrounding abstraction, abstraction became a key term for me, and I was attuned to instances in popular discourse when the concept was made salient. During the time that I was writing this, I was watching, completely serendipitously, the Ken Burns documentary *Jazz*, and there are actually a couple of moments through out the series where commentators describe instances of jazz performance as highly abstract, and when they used the term explicitly, my ears pricked up and I hyperventilated." Harper swiftly crosses mediums, and yet he ultimately settles on narrative literature as the form that can most saliently mobilize abstraction in service of progressive social critique. The larger implication of Harper's conclusion would then necessitate a major re-centering of the literary within African American aesthetic discourse.

When, a week after my conversation with Harper, a friend invited me to see an exhibition of Mark Bradford's "Be Strong Boquan," at Hauser & Wirth, I was reminded of some of the problematics Harper had discussed with me, about blackness and abstraction, the grid and negative imagery. I was quite taken with Bradford's massive palimpsestic paintings, where layers of material shatter into, cut through and break apart the others, and read some interviews with the artist. When he described his work as "social abstraction," I realized Harper had given me the kind of serendipitous moment he spoke about, where a chance encounter with a work leaves one's brain ringing, where immediacy and intellectualization synch up, and life, for just a flicker of an instant, seems to directly encourage, be conspiring towards a kind of scholarly disposition.

SHOULD LITERATURE BE “RELATABLE?”

BECCA SOUZA

There’s a question going around academic circles and popping up in conversation between instructors. Should literature—and art—be “relatable”?

This semester, I’m taking the heavy English course that many majors choose to undergo—Major Texts in Critical Theory. Theorists have been arguing about why we study literature and the purpose of art since the time of Plato. After hearing Professor Catherine Robson mention the topic of “relatability” in her British Literature II course last semester, I’ve realized this debate still has a contemporary application: Should an effort be made to make books of the English canon more interesting to students by stressing their relatability? Or should they be pushed forward for their other values, despite unrelatable characters and circumstances? I had a chance to talk with Prof. Robson on this subject, and her argument against relatability is summed up in this question: “Do we want the work to confirm our ideas or do we want it to unsettle us?”

Many scholars think that relatability is an amateur method of critical analysis. While identification is one of the pleasures of reading, to judge a work solely on whether or not you felt connected to the characters is a failure of engagement. “I think relatability is a quick emotion; you don’t have to sit and figure it out. It’s a first response,” Prof. Robson responds, “I think students know that academic classes are about going beyond the first response.”

One argument in defense of relatability points out how relatability depends on *who* is reading. As a non-male, non-white, modern-day reader of literature, I have to make an effort to connect with the characters in my coursework all the time. However, this isn’t to say that I am never able to relate to the works I’ve encountered. “Relatable” in this sense becomes a subjective term—who will be able to identify with what? Questioning the reader complicates the idea of relatability. If we consider how relatability



Making Disney princesses more relatable.

depends on the reader, then all of the identities attached to that reader become apparent. Some argue that the books we study actually speak to a very limited type of experience, and that finding representation for people of color or women or LGBT people in novels is an area that still needs work. In this sense, by critiquing relatability, we may be discounting the efforts of those who work to find political representation in the novels that are read in literature courses.

Yet sometimes what is deemed “unrelatable” can surprise you. Professor Robson encountered this when she taught the contemporary novel, *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes. Initially she thought that the protagonist’s very specific circumstances would prevent students from relating to him, creating a barrier between them and critical analysis. “The character’s a bit older in his 60s, I’m in my 50s; I found it very relatable. I wondered ‘is this relatable, will it mean the same thing, are my students going to be able to relate since they’re not 50, 60 years old?’ It’s about looking back 40 years back to when you were an undergraduate. It ended up being a very beautiful thing. I thought, ‘how can they know that!’ We tend to think we will relate to characters who are close to us—the same age,

gender, race, whatever—but a good representation of the human is going to speak to any human.” The barrier of relatability fades away in a work that actively challenges convention or opens up a new experience for the reader—which puts the reader in a place ready for critical thinking.

So what role does relatability have in the classroom? Perhaps we should read works precisely because they are “unrelatable.” Professor Robson finds another way to handle “relatability” in her reading lists. “I find it very useful to put *Jane Eyre* (which is sort of a relatable text; students will say, ‘Oh I really identified with Jane!’) next to the novel Charlotte Brontë’s sister wrote, *Wuthering Heights*. The central figures in that novel, Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, are simply not relatable—they’re strange, unlikeable—and if you use that criterion of ‘relatable,’ you think, well, this doesn’t work. But clearly, Emily Brontë doesn’t *care* whether you relate to them, or identify with them. She’s got a very different set of ideas in play.” Emotional reactions to a novel or work or art could be used as a gateway into deeper discussion.

In my own experience as an English student, there have of course been times when I felt I just “couldn’t get into” one of the books on my reading list. *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, for example, has shown up in several of my classes. Each time I struggle to find myself in the world of deeply imperialistic white men. But even so, I am able to appreciate its place in literary history and the technical developments it offered, even if the story does not particularly tug at my heartstrings. Or take *Robinson Crusoe*, which plainly follows the daily routines of a man stranded on an island. Perhaps initially I couldn’t bring myself to relate to Crusoe’s obsessive cataloging, I *am* able to relate to Crusoe’s desire to create meaning or the anxieties of a shifting market society. Relate or don’t relate to the books you read, but don’t stop there.

GRADUATING SENIORS

ANDREW SCHLAGER

This year, ten English majors wrote theses. After a year in the honors program, directed by Prof. Patricia Crain and advised by faculty members in the English Department, here's what they had to say about their projects:

Emma McElligott

My thesis, "The Architecture of Language and Propaganda: An Analysis of Censorship and Influence in the Works of Elizabeth Bowen and George Orwell," studies the influence of censorship regulations on literature that was created during or just after the Blitz. It notes instances of both resistance and compliance from authors, and determines that authors were willing to give up certain rights to expression in order to protect the greater good of the country; however, writers managed to find ways to represent this type of inconvenience. The essay also examines how often overlooked groups were represented in Blitz literature. (Honorable Mention for the Gibson Prize.)

Colin Drohan

My thesis, "I Feel Like I'm Everybody: Camp Sensibility in Joe Brainard's *I Remember* and and His Legacy," looks at Joe Brainard's book-length poem *I Remember*, a work I argue is understudied. I close-read sections of the book concerned with Brainard's camp sensibility using Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" to see how Brainard is employing an "I" that equates him with all of his readers. In the end, I examine Brainard's camp legacy in his archive and the work of his friend, the poet David Trinidad.

Sami Emory

This thesis, "Reading Riverbend," is a literary examination of *Baghdad Burning*, the prolific English-language blog written by the pseudonymous Iraqi writer Riverbend. My analysis is driven by an investigation into the historical amnesia of the Iraq War and centers around Riverbend's representations of the American response to the war and occupation. Supported by literary critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Edward Said, I look at the nature of this response through Riverbend's satirization of the American media and through her interactions with her American readers, moments which I call "online orientalism." (Winner of the CLS Award.)

Min Xi Chua

My thesis, "Ma-Lai-Xi-Ya, Malaiyur, Malaysia: The Family Saga as Critique of Postcolonial Malaysian Nationhood in Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* and Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother*" explores how the generic and thematic concept of the family saga is used in two contemporary Malaysian novels as a means of national critique. This is based on the premise, noted in works such as Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, that family serves as the affective and structural basis for the nation. Ultimately, my thesis shows how both novels use the family saga to reveal the inherent instability of postcolonial Malaysian nationhood, as well as interrogating some of the flaws of this approach. (Winner of the Gibson Prize.)

Megan Steiner

"Playtesting Philosophy: Identity (Re)Construction and Ethical Exploration in *The Talos Principle*" explores the effects of medium on our understandings of philosophical precepts through a case study of first-person puzzle-adventure game *The Talos Principle*, wherein players adopt the identity of an Artificial Intelligence and read over one hundred philosophical and literary texts, and are challenged by a game-spanning Socratic dialogue with a non-player character to question the validity of the epistemological, existential and ontological theories they've discovered therein. By recasting the evaluation of philosophical concepts as a process of "playtesting," adopting multiple ethical perspectives and finding the "glitches" in each, the video game can be understood as an explicit philosophical teaching tool, an ethical playground wherein philosophical literature can be encountered and empirically tested, read and tried, in a manner unachievable by any other single medium. (Winner of the Lind Prize; Megan also received the Dean's Award for Scholarship, presented for academic excellence and achievement in the Humanities.)

Alex Braverman

Fanfiction is the largest literary genre about which there is virtually no scholarship. In an attempt to remedy this lack, my thesis project, "Explicit: Sherlock Holmes Fanfiction and Readerly Desire," theorizes the genre as an expression of readerly desire. Desire, in this case, connotes the sexual and the intellectual, the imaginative and the appropriative: ultimately, it is the urge, on the part of the reader, to get closer to the world and ideas of the source text. Using three different Sherlock Holmes fics, I argue that this project of proximity is executed through an examination of characters and their relationships using popular psychological and literary beliefs about selfhood as rooted in childhood and interiority conceptualized as topographical space. My thesis draws on the work of René Girard, Eve Sedgwick, Michael Saler, Henry Jenkins, and Janice Radway in order to demonstrate the rich possibilities for critical attention that exist in the genre of fanfiction. (Winner of the Baer Memorial Prize.)

Andrew Schlager

In "A Bell That Could Never Ring: Orality, Textuality and Contemporary African American Literature," I analyze three contemporary works of African American literature, particularly as they relate or fail to relate to African American literary theory's ambivalent attachment to the trope of orality. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's play *An Octoroon*, Claudia Rankine's book of poetry *Citizen: An American Lyric*, and Ta-Nehisi Coates's non-fiction book *Between the World and Me* all register thorny and frustrated questions regarding the status of textuality and orality in the African American literary tradition. (Winner of the Holmes Award and the Deakins Prize.)

Stephanie Lam

Through a taxonomy of the gothic doubles found in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I explore the psychological phenomenon of the fractured ego. I argue that the doubling that occurs within the texts are a response to fin de siècle psychology allowing the authors to form their own test cases for the exploration of the Self.

Charline Jao

"Trials of the Living Dead: Statelessness and Political Bodies in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*" combines a law and literature analysis with anthropological texts to examine the construction of Shelley's monster as an embodiment of both legal and cultural statelessness. (Winner of the Bouton Memorial Award.)

Madeline D'Agostino

In "This is a Terrible War, Baby': Trauma in Hemingway's Early Novels" I explore the ways that the traumas endured by the main characters of *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* impact them and guide the plot of each novel. By focusing on psychological as well as physical traumas, I present Lady Brett Ashley and Catherine Barkley as more influential in the action of the novel, examine the vulnerabilities of Jake Barnes and Frederic Henry, and consider the possibility that all four characters suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder.

What about those graduating English majors who decided to forego the honors route? The Blotter sat down with two of them, Alexander Charles and Alex Mercuri, to discuss their time at NYU and to reflect on the department.

Alex Mercuri, who works in the department as the an office assistant, noted that he "came to the English major after an abortive semester majoring in music." He fondly remembered his transition, and even offered some prospective advice to future majors: "I learned so much...to current undergrads: don't scoff at discussion sections, because you're going to meet some wildly intelligent people with fresh perspectives." Of particular importance to Mercuri was Prof. Richard Halpern's Shakespeare survey, especially as it was "mediated by the Titan of TA's Ruby Lowe." The work that Mercuri did during his time in the department shaped his writing skills, he observed, and also exposed him to all kinds of writers. After seeing a flyer for a talk critic Ramzi Fawaz was giving, Mercuri would eventually end up recommending the book, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*, to journalist and author Ta-Nehisi Coates over Twitter. "I've been waiting to brag about this for a while," he added, snappily. As for his after graduation plans, Mercuri hopes to "stay in the NY Metro area and work in The Pragmatic End of the Arts," which he broke down as "fancy-lad code for 'please hire me publishing houses/production companies/art galleries/your friend's weird startup.'"

Alexander Charles, who began his time at NYU as a philosophy major, "chose to major in English because it was the discipline that allowed me to pursue my interests in literature, philosophy and theory"; it was "one of the best decisions I've made." Charles also valued the department for the wide variety of materials it exposed him to: "The major requirements taught me much about literature that I might not have otherwise had the chance to [learn]... I could list how almost every professor in the department has helped me in some way or another." With regards to how the major helped his professional prospects, Charles noticed an increase in "the number of interviews I scheduled after I transferred to English... I do believe that [without this major] I would not have been able to pursue my professional interests in law, publishing, tech, teaching and translating." He's also "met some of the people who [he] hopes will be lifelong friends." As for his post-graduation plans, Charles exclaimed "Where to start! I have many—but it'll suffice to say that I plan on traveling the world."

MA THESES THIS SPRING

This year, **Tanya Schmidt's** "'Fugitive Love': Venus and Cupid On Stage in Isabella Andreini's *La Mirtila* (1588) and Lady Mary Wroth's *Love's Victory* (1620)" explores the representation and staging of desire, as well as the prophetic quality attributed to Venus and Cupid, in two early modern pastoral plays. **Anthony Americo's** "'Out of that Vast Tomb Christianity Issued to Supersede the Caesars': *Ben-Hur*, Extra-Nationalism and the American Empire" claims that *Ben-Hur* argues for a transcendent Christianity that rethinks the nation by promising to sever the Christian's ties to race, religion and nation. However transcendent this Christianity seems, it actually is imperial in nature and keeps in place strict hierarchies along racial, economic and gendered lines. **Robert Magella's** "'Simplify Me When I Am Dead': Complicating things with Virginia Woolf, Rupert Brooke, and 'Modernism'" investigates the relationship between Woolf and Brooke, with particular attention to their Essays, in the interest of pluralizing certain reified concepts about these authors and their "Modernism." **Peter Tasca's** thesis explores the relationship of Jonathan Swift's *The Drapier's Letters* with an emerging sense of Irish nationhood and the creation of a public sphere by looking at the first print edition of these series of pamphlets.

SECOND THOUGHTS:

PROFESSOR QUAYSON OFFERS A DIFFERENT LOOK AT POSTCOLONIAL TRAGEDY

CYNTHIA DE LUNA



Ato Quayson

NYU's English Department always attracts professors from many different places, and this semester is no different. Professor Ato Quayson is here from the University of Toronto. He received his Ph.D. from Cambridge and is interested in areas such as urban studies, postmodernism, tragedy, and postcolonial and diasporic writing. Many of his publications—like *Oxford Street, Accra*; *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*; and *African Literature: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*—explore these areas of research. Similarly, he is teaching two courses in the areas of postcolonialism and African literature this semester: an undergraduate “Introduction to African Literature” course and a graduate course titled “Postcolonial Tragedy: Concepts, Forms, Histories.”

Professor Quayson has begun his visit at NYU with a lecture related to one of his major interests, postcolonial literature. The lecture Professor Quayson gave on February 3rd was titled “On the Affliction of Second Thoughts: Modes of Doubt in Postcolonial Tragedy.” The lecture gave listeners a look into the kind of information Professor Quayson will be seeking and the kind of work he'll be doing while here at NYU, as the subject of the lecture worked toward a book he'll

be writing, tentatively called *On Postcolonial Tragedy*.

The talk focused on specific works—by South African, Martinican, Nigerian, and African-American writers—such as J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Fact of Blackness*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, and some of Toni Morrison's writings. Before proceeding to these examples, however, Professor Quayson clarified the definition of tragedy he would be using to shape his thoughts on the subject. He used Aristotle's definition, which involves the viewer or reader in the ethical concerns and actions of another character; the tragedy that Professor Quayson was most interested in was one that elicited pity, one that he could relate to a person's inner thoughts.

The interior monologue, presented within the context of the soliloquy, was the focus of Professor Quayson's lecture from that point on, beginning with the conditions necessary for the interior monologue. Firstly, some spiritual element that requires reflection is needed, like a dogma or belief. The resulting contemplation of or reflection on the self implicates a past self that is put in relation with the present self through forms of narration. The interior “dialogue” that occurs between the past and present selves helps the self translate the external world for the internal world.

Interior monologues tend to involve sensations and emotional states that can't be accurately portrayed through language and are therefore ambiguous. The feelings and states that are considered in the interior monologue only become more ambiguous as time passes, and reflecting on those states affects the visual memories associated with them. These visual memories, or “rememories,” as Professor Quayson called them, visually represent the act of reflection, of the second thought, which can be argumentative or doubtful in nature, or neither.

Professor Quayson later took an opportunity to relate these “rememories” to displacement as a result of colonialism. The displacement of people from their homes leads to a nostalgic, emotional attachment to a specific place, and Professor Quayson equates this loss of geography to the loss of any relationship with another person. What happens is a displacement from a space that can never be returned to as it no longer exists. It only exists in memories, but as with the case of “rememories,” memories of a place are easily altered and leave room for doubt. By analyzing the way the internal monologue works and the way people process memories and emotions, Professor Quayson not only offered his listeners a new way to consider the inner self in relation to the external world, but also a second thought on the matter of postcolonial tragedy.



IN AND OF THE CITY:

A LOOK INSIDE THE NYSCAPES WORKING GROUP

CYNTHIA DE LUNA

Just being in New York City provides NYU students with countless resources and opportunities to pursue their interests. One of the English department's graduate student working groups, NewYorkScapes, grew out of a desire to take advantage of those resources and opportunities. The group started in 2013 after a conversation between Professor Thomas Augst and two doctoral students, Kristen Highland and Blevin Shelnutt, who wanted to combine their studies of 19th-century New York with the digital humanities.

This is precisely the kind of junction the NYScapes group makes possible, exploring the city through different texts and different periods of time. Advised by Augst, a professor in NYU's English department, and Peter Wosh, a professor in NYU's History department, and coordinated by Sara Patridge and Nathaniel Preus, two graduate students, NYScapes uses digital tools to study the space of the city. It is a research collaborative that aims to produce and not just discuss, and it allows for students to take part in long-term projects that investigate literature and culture in relation to urban space.

Part of the group's work involves hosting events that allow its members to explore digital tools and new ways to think about space and physical location in the city. In the two years, they have held workshops specifically related to the use of digital platforms. Their April 2015 workshop

focused on a dataset platform named Inquisite that the group has helped develop. Inquisite is a platform meant to be used by various research groups seeking to acquire and organize data for their various projects, granting its users access to visualizations of their data and allowing them to contribute their own research as well. The workshop sought to explore how Inquisite would be applicable to project-based learning that involved digital tools and how it would make visualization and the acquisition of data easier, particularly with respect to teaching at NYU.

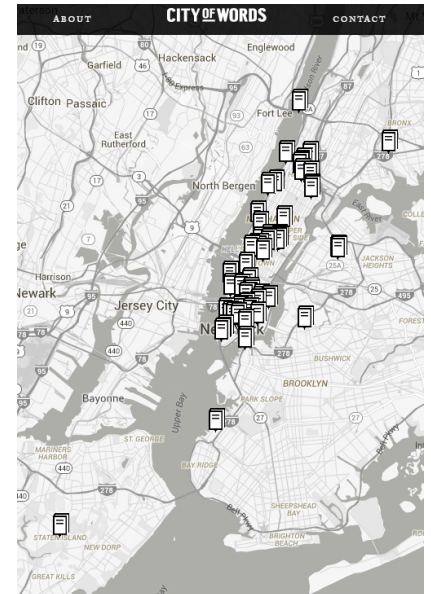
The group held a meeting in February 2015 to learn more about an app named "City of Words," created by Laura Fisher, an English professor at Ryerson University, and Ali Shamas Qadeer, a Toronto-based designer and developer. The app and website map excerpts of literary and historical texts onto a map of New York City. Visiting the website brings up a map of the city with a number of locations already marked. Clicking on those locations will bring up chapters or poems that were set at that specific address. As a project that connects the literary to the physical, "City of Words" spoke to the aims of the NYScapes group and allowed the group to learn more about ways to apply digital tools to their research.

Of course, as a working group deeply involved in the English department, NYScapes fosters sustained attention to particular texts. So far there have been two written works that they have specifically discussed at events. One such work, discussed in October 2014, was *Whitman Among the Bohemians*, a collection of essays tied to a physical location in the city called Pfaff's Cellar, once located on Broadway near Bleecker Street. This past October, the group looked at David Kishik's *The Manhattan Project*, a scholarly work that imagines Walter Benjamin's experiences in New York City post World War II and explores the city through everything from the graffiti on its buildings to the people on its streets.

Some NYScapes events focus heavily on discussion not only of texts about urban space but of the effect of urban space on social discourses. On April 28th of this year, the NYScapes group and the Gotham Center at CUNY held a roundtable discussion entitled "Solidarity and the City" that explored the ways scholars, educators, and activists react to the way that urban space affects social justice work, particularly within the context of urban diversity and the use of digital tools in urban projects. Among those present were Ben Blackshear, a member of the Brooklyn-based economic-justice organization SolidarityNYC, Amaka Okechukwu, an Oral Historian and Archival Specialist at Weeksville Heritage Center, Manisa Maharawal, a PhD candidate in Anthropology at CUNY and a participant in the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project's "Narratives of Displacement," Daniel Morales, a visiting scholar at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Jonathan Soffer, a Professor of History and the Department Chair of Technology, Culture, and Society at NYU's Tandon School of Engineering.

While plenty of the group's material comes from events such as these, a good amount of it comes from courses that are held at NYU's graduate English and History departments. One such course, taught in Fall 2014 by Professor Augst and Nicholas Wolf, formerly an Assistant Professor and Faculty Fellow in Irish Studies and now a Research Data Management Librarian with NYU Libraries, was a practicum in digital humanities named "Mapping the Archive: Cultural Geographies of New York City." This course taught students how to use digital tools and how to manipulate data for the purposes of mapping and visualization. In Spring 2015, Professor Augst's "Digital Methods in Historical Inquiry" had a similar goal, teaching students how to apply specific tools to their research. Both courses contributed to the development of Inquisite.

While the working group calls mostly for the participation of graduate students, undergrads have had a chance to get involved in this kind of work in a course taught by Professor Augst and Professor de Sá Pereira this semester. The course, "Writing New York," has integrated the spirit of NYScapes projects into undergraduate teaching and has provided students with readings and writing and research exercises that put the idea of place in conversation with different genres and media. But undergraduates should also feel free to get involved in NYScapes itself. "We'd be happy to have undergraduates involved in NYScapes," says Professor Augst. "They should go to events and get in touch with me if they are interested in getting more involved." So if you like the idea of helping to build a "production studio for New York City landscape"—as Professor Augst describes NYScapes—then being a student in the city just got even more exciting.



BOOKISH MEDIA: MATTHEW KIRSCHENBAUM DELIVERS ANNUAL FALES LECTURE

PETER TASCA

Matthew Kirschenbaum, Associate Professor of English at the University of Maryland, began the annual Fales Lecture in English and American Literature by asking what seemed like, at first glance, a simple question: What is a book? The audience might have expected the answer to be relatively straightforward. Yet Professor Kirschenbaum, the author of *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (2008) and the forthcoming *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing*, asked again, this time re-posing the question more precisely: "What is a book nowadays, which is, to say, a contemporary trade book brought out by a major house?"

His answer, to those unfamiliar with the thinking of Digital Humanities and Media Studies, turned out to be quite surprising. First, Kirschenbaum said, a book is a format, but not a format in the bibliographical sense, not the tangible arrangement of leaves and gatherings. In the age of the computer and phone screen, a book is a format in the medial sense that media theorist and Digital Humanities professor Jonathan Sterne has described: "a code that conditions the experience of the medium and its processing protocols."



Moreover, today a book is also a file, which means that it exists as a coherent digital asset stored in a repository and in the iCloud. In fact, a book is an assemblage of digital assets consisting of multiple file-types. In this sense, it is also a network, since digital assets must be arranged to interact with one another in structured and predictable ways in order to generate desired outputs like an ePub file or an InDesign document. Thus, the book we hold in our hands, rather than consist of the sine qua non of bookishness, is actually just one medium of its output, just one permutation among the many derived from an interrelated network of digital assets.

In other words, the file, rather than the page, has become the new unit of production. As John B. Thompson illustrated in *The Merchants of Culture*, one no longer has the option of going to press without a file on hand. For books, the ontology of representation now proceeds from the data stream rather than from the printing press. This shift has had several consequences not only for the way we think about books and consume them but also for their relationship with other media forms.

For this reason, Kirschenbaum maintained that some books can also be nodes in a transmedial storytelling network. Consequently, at the material level of their composition, production, and circulation, books share deep homologies with other media types and formats, even in fact participating in the same systems and infrastructures of distribution and consumption. Everything about the release of a *Harry Potter* novel, for instance, illustrates the manner in which publishers have started to treat books as media properties. In addition to the the global laydown date, a trade innovation which originated with the *Potter* franchise and stipulated that the book would go on sale simultaneously in worldwide markets, Kirschenbaum went on to detail not only the fleets of shipping trucks equipped with GPS making deliveries to stores from the binderies but also the high-test opaque plastic in which copies of the book were sealed and then stored in prior to release.

Although in the past there have been several books which have relied upon such transmedial networks for their effects (Kirschenbaum pointed to the "bookish media" of *Tristram Shandy* as well as the texts, objects, and stage performances accompanying the transmedial *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for examples), Kirschenbaum cautioned the audience not to underestimate the radicalness of this new ontology of representation underpinning digital information. The materiality of modern computation differs radically from past incarnations primarily as a result of the convergence narrative.

The convergence narrative—as articulated by the likes of such diverse figures as Ithiel de Sola Pool, Friedrich Kittler, and Bill Gates—rests upon the binary symbolic representational scheme of modern computing. Because binary numbers can both be used to model the key precepts of Boolean logic and be added and subtracted in computation, they have been able to bridge content-types that have in the past been separated by unique material ontologies. A craftsman in the 19th century, for instance, would have had to cast a porcelain figurine of Uncle Tom using only a description from the novel or the physique of a stage-actor.

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On the other hand, the data from a live-motion capture session can be used to animate a computer generated character in a virtual cartoon, to render the three-dimensional protagonist of a video-game, and to define the proportions of a line of action figures fabricated from a digital wire frame.

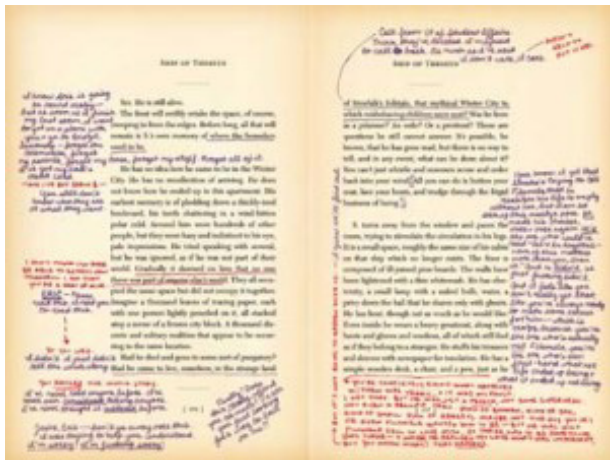
This logic of convergence within the digital medium has now begun to govern the tools and technologies which produce books. We now see this media converging in a common application environment, with different kinds of files unified within a digital asset management system which are then available for re-purposing in a variety of different media formats. Moreover, only one of these different media formats happens to be a printed book in the conventional sense. Kirschenbaum suggested that bookishness is a spectrum of features and affordances which can be strategically brought into being within the wider media range and that books themselves are increasingly repositioned in relation to other media properties comprising a franchise or a brand.

He then went on to consider the strikingly bookish example of *S.*, a novel by Doug Dorst and J. J. Abrams published by Mulholland Books on October 29th, 2013 in an edition of over 200,000 copies. To read *S.* one must remove shrink wrap, break a seal, and slide a volume entitled *Ship of Theseus* from the slipcase. The "S" of the title can be found on the slipcase itself, the black letter appearing embossed and emblazoned on the cover. In other words, *S.* is a book within a book, but one that doubles down on its bookishness.

The *Ship of Theseus* was purportedly written by a mysterious V.M. Straka in 1949 and translated by F.X. Caldeira. The protagonist narrating the story is only identified as "S." Presented as a checked out and never returned library copy with yellow, weather-worn pages, the book also contains handwritten messages in its margins by two other protagonists: Eric and Jen. They have been swapping the book with one another, exchanging comments and speculations as to the author's identity.

Yet the collaboration of television producer and filmmaker J. J. Abrams with novelist Doug Dorst makes up the story of *S.* just as much as this spiraling meta-fiction. Moreover, although Mulholland Books published *S.*, they themselves did not make it. Melcher Media, a small imprint based in lower Manhattan, performed this task. As the "media" in the title implies, Melcher Media does not produce books, but, as Kirschenbaum argued, bookish media. Neither a design shop nor a publisher, Melcher outsources their design work and are contracted by publishers who need a team to focus on an individual project. Melcher develops the concepts that turn a simple story into a fully realized bookish production.

These concepts typically involve artwork, nonstandard dimensions, bindings, paper stocks, page layouts, and, particularly in the case of *S.*, inserts. But Philadelphia's own Headcase Design actually executed the concept designs produced by Melcher. In addition, there was a Canadian firm that carried out the color separation, paper suppliers that provided the paper stocks, and a printer in China along with a Chinese labor force some of whom performed what has been referred to in the business as "handwork." This euphemism refers to the practice of manually placing each and every one of the inserts into each copy, one at a time and at a precise page opening.



A page out of *S.*

Reading *S.*, then, involves a suspension of disbelief. While the book fell into our hands principally because of its status as a mass-produced commodity, we must pretend that we have an original, one-of-a-kind copy. Moreover, numerous journalistic articles have detailed the technical virtuosity going into the production of *S.*, leading Kirschenbaum to comment how the circulation of such information to industry insiders and ecstatic fans constitutes one of the defining features of bookish media. One design journal called PaperSpecs, in particular, called *S.* the most complex project of 2013.

For Kirschenbaum, the suspension of disbelief that *S.* requires constitutes the defining feature of bookishness. *S.*, therefore, is not a book in the traditional sense. On the contrary, *S.* is media produced and designed to behave like a book, right down to the synthetic fabric dressing its boards. Kirschenbaum called such effects examples of Walter Ong's "secondary materiality," both like and unlike materiality itself, self-consciously replicating it instead. The title *Ship of Theseus* slyly acknowledges this aspect of the book's production. It comes from a famous parable by Plutarch in which he asks whether a ship whose boards and beams have been entirely replaced by new timber is still the same ship. This paradigm of bookish media promises to provide entirely new avenues for reading, distributing, and thinking about books, a paradigm that ironically remains affiliated to reproducing a time-honored and tactile experience for book-lovers in the digital age.

STAGING WITTGENSTEIN:

DRAMATIC LITERATURE MAJOR BLAIR SIMMONS ('16) MAKES THEATER OF PHILOSOPHY

ANDREW SCHLAGER

Not all twelve of the seventy-two-inch latex balloons can pop. Well, I suppose they all could pop, technically, but to be left with none would be ruinous. Three have burst already, leaving nine giant white options left for performance, deflated and waiting, but at least two must endure, intact, until May 16th, the night when Dramatic Literature senior Blair Simmons and Dramatic Writing/Philosophy junior Nikita Lebedev will put up “Staging Wittgenstein” in the English Department’s Event Space at 9:00 pm. “The goal of this project is to dramatize the philosophical thought conveyed in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* through the lens of his later idea of the ‘language game,’” Simmons writes. “We have attempted to create a system of visually dramatized representations of the linguistic propositions put forth in the *Tractatus* in order to ground this ungroundable text.” The project is something of a culmination for Simmons, who came to NYU as a Math major, and then switched to Dramatic Literature after taking a course on Modern Drama taught by Professor Julia Jarcho. Simmons was quick to note the influence of the Dramatic Literature program on her theatrical sensibility: “I was doing musical theater in high school. Not that I don’t not love musical theater anymore. I love it for a different reason, because I now have a new appreciation of its nonsensical structure, the bursting out of songs in-between intense emptions. I now appreciate it on a very different level.”

I pressed Simmons further, asking if her work in Dramatic Literature had perhaps allowed for this new level of appreciation, and she nodded fervently. “The working playwrights that teach in Dramatic Literature begin in a theoretical place, or mode, which allowed me to look at the structure of a piece for what it is and what it is not; in the case of the musical, it is using a sort of fantastical, or what now appears to me as a strange explosion of song that makes ecstatic the emotion of a piece. I was able to experience musicals through their form thanks to Drama Lit.” This level of formal awareness, or of the theater as a medium, Simmons noted, was one of her biggest takeaways for her time in the program. “Some people call the *Tractatus* a logical poem,” Simmons glossed, “and the structure of our piece seeks to give this philosophy a physical reference frame.”



As for the balloons, they are both props and costume pieces in “Staging Wittgenstein.” As per Simmons’s dramaturgy, the balloons are meant to evoke the bounded nature of the solipsistically conceived world. “Wittgenstein presents propositions that have solipsistic imaginative power,” she observes. She was precisely uninterested in representing Wittgenstein, in creating a piece that made the same claims as Wittgenstein’s philosophy; instead, she hoped to use the imaginative power of these propositions to create associated dramatic material and experience. When I asked if there would be any bursting into song, she conceded that there would be a looper pedal deployed for layered sounds—a far cry from her high school production of *Urinetown*.

Simmons is also a Computer Science minor, and works at the NYU LaGuardia Studio 3-D Print Shop. These experiences have allowed her to think of her work as process, and to think about what she called “process art” more broadly. “Even if this piece fails performatively, or isn’t the exact engagement with the *Tractatus* I’d hoped for, I still hope it’s a pleasurable and playful event—that seems most important.” Having attended a rehearsal for the project, I assured her it was pleasurable, and that by virtue of using Wittgenstein as both a paratext and context, she, or rather her audience, would find him inescapable: the piece’s boundary, ballooning around the live event.

GIVING BACK: ALYSSA LEAL, DEPARTMENT MANAGER

CYNTHIA DE LUNA

There's a great deal of affection and accomplishment that comes with giving back to a place you love. Many of us have most likely heard such a thing from past schools we have attended, urging us to give back to a place that was a part of our lives for a significant amount of time. We all get those mailings, but many of us ignore them because those schools didn't feel like favorable, integral moments of our lives. But there are some places that do feel that special, places that we truly do want to give back to, and for Alyssa Leal, NYU is that kind of place.

Alyssa graduated from NYU with a B.A. in Latin American Studies in 1998 and with an M.A. in Higher Education Administration in 2005. When I learned that she went on to graduate school for such a different degree, I was curious about what prompted her to go after something so different, but it's not such a surprising change after all when you consider her work experience here at NYU, especially while she was an undergraduate student. Alyssa started working at NYU as a student employee at the Office of Student Life. For the three or four years she spent there, she helped with new student orientations, the Program Board, student clubs, and other offices and activities within the Office of Student Life, including student services and programs for LGBT, international, African American, and Latino students. "The staff and administrators there were so wonderful and really enjoyed their jobs and working with students and it left a huge impression on me," Alyssa told me. "If I hadn't worked there, I might not have been as aware or involved, and might have felt less connected to NYU. I realized the positive impact of having someone to go to, how a group or an office could [affect] a student's experience outside of the classroom."



In her final undergraduate year in 1997, Alyssa got a full-time job at the Silver School of Social Work as a registration assistant. A year later, she came to work here at the English Department as the Graduate Program Administrative Aide and later as the Graduate Program Administrator. She stayed here until 2006, a year after completing graduate school, and then decided to work as the Associate Director for the Center of Publishing in 2007 so she could branch out and broaden her experience. She later worked at the Tisch School of the Arts in 2010 as Associate Director for Student Services, taking on multiple responsibilities that involved Open Arts courses and study abroad, summer high school, and visiting student programs and, later on in 2013, marketing, advertising, and website and blog development. She was ultimately promoted to Director of Recruitment and Student Services for Tisch Special Programs before returning to the English Department in October 2015.

Much of Alyssa's pre-graduate school experience working with administrators and students outside the classroom influenced her decision about where to go in graduate school. She told me, "As an undergrad I was very passionate about the history, politics and literature of Latin America, and after I graduated I started pursuing an MPA in Public Administration. While I was in grad school I started to re-evaluate my future and after realizing that working with students and faculty really brought me joy, I decided to apply to the MA in Higher Education, and thankfully was able to transfer my credits!"

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I asked Alyssa what some of her favorite memories working at the English Department were, and she gave me three of her favorites:

- “Before Friendster, MySpace and Facebook, it was difficult to know who someone was in the department or what they looked like so I created a wall of polaroid photos. ... The wall had grown to include 80-100 photos. Faculty and students would stop by and I’d hear, ‘Ah, so that’s who that is!’ It’s funny to think how this wall was like the first iteration of an English Department Facebook page!
- “I also loved planning our end of the year parties and we would all be involved with picking the music, decorating, deciding on the food and everyone would even chip in to help chop fruit for my sangria recipe. I think these events would remind us that we were all connected and actually enjoyed each other’s company.
- “I remember holding [Professor] Cyrus Patell’s son Liam when he was a baby, so you can imagine how long ago that was!”

Alyssa has really enjoyed her time not only at NYU, as both a student and a member of the faculty, but also especially her time here at the English Department. While she wasn’t an English student herself, she spent enough years here at the department that she felt the need to come back after she had left to experience more, and it’s not difficult to see why she returned. As she told me, “The faculty, students and staff of the English Department are some of the best people I’ve met at NYU, if not in life. It wasn’t a hard decision at all to come back here.”

SPRING CLS EVENT: THE CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE SERIES PARTNERS WITH THE MINETTA REVIEW TO CELEBRATE NYU POETS

LOUISA BRADY AND KAZUE THOMAS

On April 14th of this year, a crowd gathered at Greenwich Village’s Jefferson Market Library for a reading featuring a diverse range of NYU poets. Among the attendees of the event—which was co-sponsored by the Contemporary Literature Series and NYU’s *Minetta Review*—were students, faculty members, and lovers of literature.

A considerable portion of the audience was made up of staff members and editors of *Minetta*, which this event was organized to celebrate. Established in 1974, *Minetta Review* is the oldest surviving literary publication of NYU. The magazine, published twice annually, features a wide variety of work from the NYU’s undergraduate student body, including prose, poetry, and artwork.

The event featured poets Kevin Beerman, Sebastian Lopez Calvo, Kari Sonde, Alana Saab, Crystal Valentine, Christopher Soto, and NYU faculty member Scott Hightower, recently honored with the 2016 Barnes & Nobles Writer for Writers Award. Several, though not all, of the readers have been featured in past *Minetta Review* editions. Each poet read for several minutes, sharing a variety of poems.

“It’s hard to say what my process was,” said Beerman, a senior, on how he chose which of his work to read for the event. “I considered stuff that I was writing up until the day or two before the reading. I wanted to read poems that had a variety of tones and topics, that incorporated the variety of styles I like to write in.”

The whole evening seemed to reflect this attitude. At the end of the day, it was a gathering of writers from different backgrounds, reading about topics that they were passionate about or personally connected to. Yet everyone, readers and listeners alike, were united by a common purpose: listening to and learning from their peers.

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Top row: Scott Hightower, Sebastian Lopez Calvo, Kevin Beerman, Kari Sonde
Bottom row: Crystal Valentine, Christopher Soto, Alana Saab

Valentine, who was named NYC Youth Poet in 2015, explained her process in preparing for the event as well. She said, “Most times when I enter inherently white spaces, such as NYU and academia in general, I try to take up as much space as possible by doing my most unapologetic poems, poems that speak of my identity and confront my oppressors.” Valentine is also the current two-time Grand Slam Champion of NYU’s poetry slam team and explained how different a reading and a slam can feel. “The room is always much quieter [at NYU readings] and I sometimes find myself having to ask the audience to actively engage with me, to let me know that they are there,” she said. “But it’s always great performing with other poets. I always learn so much and gain a new perspective.”

The readings were open to the public, and their location at the historic library was indicative of both organizations’ commitment to the Greenwich Village community. *Minetta Review* co-editor and CLS Fellow Annesha Sengupta explained the desire to host a community-focused event; “The *Minetta Review* turned 40 last year – we’ve been part of both NYU and the village for just as long,” she said. “This semester, my co-editor Emma Thomas and I really wanted to focus on bringing *Minetta* back to its roots. This event, with its uniquely beautiful location at the Jefferson Market Public Library, with its lineup of student and professional writers, allowed us to bring it all together – our village history and our NYU home.”

While this event represented a return to *Minetta*’s roots, for the Contemporary Literature Series it represented a broadening of their usual audience. Generally focused on bringing contempo-

rary authors and poets onto the NYU campus and undergraduate classrooms, it was new ground for CLS to present NYU poets to the village at large. “We are very pleased to expand the NYU English Department’s Contemporary Literature Series by partnering with both the *Minetta Review* and the Jefferson Market Library to showcase our undergraduate creative writing talent,” said Professor Nicholas Boggs, the faculty coordinator of CLS, which he launched in 2012. Indeed, with the area’s rich literary community, it was a worthwhile endeavor. “So many poets and writers are still in the Greenwich Village area,” Christopher Soto said of the venue chosen for the event. “I think this location and keeping the readings here in Greenwich Village is phenomenal.”

To read about this semester’s roster of CLS classroom visitors—remarkable writers who have come to campus to share their work and insights with the students in a particular English course—visit <http://nyu-cls.org/>.

PASSING FANCIES AND PERMANENT WORKS: PROF. PAULA MCDOWELL INTERROGATES THE CONCEPT OF “EPHEMERA”

PETER TASCA

On the corner of West 13th and Fifth Avenue, on a Tuesday, slushy detritus choked the sidewalks, pooling alongside the curbs, this muddy flotsam the remnant of the past weekend’s snowstorm. Inside the Bark Room lecture hall at the Parsons School of Design, students had trundled in out of the wet cold, peeled off their North Face jackets, draped pea coats over chairs and lined the seats with scarves, revealing red woolen sweaters latticed with snowflake designs and flannel shirts checkered blue, and black, and green. Across the room glowing from the projection screen were rows of *Alice in Wonderland* porcelain figurines, neatly placed inside white display boxes and atop pink tissue paper, completing the little wintry scene.

Paula Fales - back to left wallThe occasion bringing all these boots hither was a presentation by Professor Paula McDowell, enjoined by the 145th anniversary of the New York Comic & PictureStory Symposium. An associate professor of English at NYU, a historian of the book, and a scholar of the eighteenth century, McDowell has authored such titles as *Women of Grub Street* (Oxford, 1998), *Elinor James: Printed Writings* (Ashgate, 2005), and her latest book *The Invention of the Oral* (Chicago, 2016). The title of tonight’s discussion was “Making and Breaking the Category of Ephemera: The Eighteenth Century as Test Case.”



Alice in Wonderland figurines



As the title suggests, the lecture emphasized the “category” of the ephemeron, rather than the ephemera themselves. Resistant to classification, the word “ephemera” itself has only been listed in the OED since 1993. Scholars have tackled this problem from a variety of angles. In 1962, for instance, John Lewis tried to circumscribe the manifold by defining “ephemera” as anything that was printed for short-term use. But the fact that ephemera may be of interest to scholars or librarians long after their production complicates this definition. Similar efforts to provide definitions by negation (saying what an ephemeron isn’t) or by function (that they are non-book printed materials) have turned out to be just as futile. For every totalizing definition, there is a counterexample to overturn it. The rise of *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, which provides access to some 150,000 ephemeral works, further complicates matters. What do ephemera become, McDowell asks, when they are digitized?

McDowell suggested that scholars return to this conundrum by putting pressure on the category itself. By historicizing the category of ephemera, we may perceive the ideological effort that went into producing an illusion of provisional completeness. Moreover, we can observe the comedy that derives from the metaphorical or literal boxes of classification failing to contain what remains by its very nature out in the open. Classification systems, said McDowell, do much more than merely put a thing in its place. They act as boundary objects, demarcate specific zones of inquiry, and represent different constituencies and social worlds. The categorical divisions they uphold often go unexamined and prove to have a lasting influence on the reception of intellectual history. The category of ephemera, for instance, implicitly divides objects into those that either have enduring value or don’t.

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If this category describes items of value either questionable or fleeting, McDowell argues, then it came into being as the residual effect of the institutionalization of the literary. This valorization of the literary and the consequent marginalization of non-literary or sub-literary works can be seen as part of a response to the unprecedented pullulation of printed works as well as the commercialization of letters. After all, with the lapse of the 1695 Licensing Act, which had previously stemmed the flow of print, the early eighteenth century saw in the space of a single decade the number of printing houses in England jump from 25 to 75 as well as the increasing circulation of what are now recognizable as modern newspapers.

The apprehension engendered by this riot of printed material was felt keenly by the most famous writers of the Augustan period: Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope. Swift and Pope frequently compared ephemera to another type of creature that only lived for the span of a day: insects. This analogy conjured up the image of works not consciously produced by sentient beings but bred like maggots on a rotting corpse. McDowell sees the activities of these two men as part of the powerful conceptual binary of the permanent and the impermanent, a distinction, she argues, which prepared the way for the nineteenth century's conception of literature.

In contrast to Pope and Swift, however, the indelible Samuel Johnson a generation later associated pamphlets with an especially English understanding of individual rights and liberties. According to Johnson, pamphlets enlivened the public sphere with spirited debate and the freedom of the press acted as a check against the power of both ministry and the monarchy. "The form of our government," Johnson vociferated, "which gives every man, that has leisure, or curiosity, or vanity, the right of inquiring into the propriety of public measures...may be reasonably imagined to have occasioned innumerable pamphlets, which would have never appeared under arbitrary governments." Not only did Johnson christen the eighteenth century "The Age of Authors," but he also worked against the privileging of poetry, fiction and drama by imploring the cognoscenti to patronize the authors of pamphlets and short tracts. These papers of the day, Johnson argued, gave a more complete picture of the uses of everyday life than the bounded works themselves did—although he also admitted the inadequacy of even the most simple cataloging systems for dealing with such a large output.

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Indeed, even those who resisted the idea of ephemera could not escape being caught up in it. Although Swift attacked the second-rate productions pumped out by Grub Street, his masterpiece *A Tale of a Tub* was hardly longer than the papers it satirized, the resemblance made even more striking by its having been stitched together with several other shorter works. In his relentless composition of *The Dunciad*, Pope too embodied the spirit of ephemera, having left enough evidence of the work's various states of incompleteness. *The Dunciad* depicts Pope's own method of composition as a series of atoms struck and dashed together.

McDowell concluded by pointing out that in the height of the Digital Age, we see more and more texts on the web bereft of any sort of hierarchy and genre. These naked texts force us to reassess our categories and value judgements even while digital archives offer to retain so-called "ephemera" for infinite preservation. In addition to calling for a more flexible type of classification that retained traces of its own construction, McDowell asserted the need for scholars to ask what place non-literary writing holds in the classroom and be willing to question our own conceptual categories.

Photos provided by Paula McDowell

THE ART OF WORDS

CYNTHIA DE LUNA

It might be strange to consider the visual arts and literature as existing under the broader category of English studies. Literature in the English language is the obvious fit, be it a novel, a poem, an article, or any other written material. The study of visual art might sound like an odd thing to include among English courses. In most paintings there are no words to read, after all, no text to analyze. So why include courses that look at visual art?

There are a few undergraduate courses this semester that take a look at art through the lens of literature or vice versa. One of them, a course taught by Professor Marion Thain and Professor Peter Nicholls titled “Impressionism and Modernism,” has started the semester by reading impressionistic works—like poems by Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, and Rosamund Marriott Wason, or Henry James’ *What Maisie Knew*—the way we would view impressionist paintings. The course has also covered visual works by the likes of Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, and James McNeill Whistler and has taken special notice of common features that are apparent across all their works and other impressionist paintings. The key point of those common features boils down to this: As the term suggests, impressionist paintings are all about capturing your impression of something. It’s about getting a single moment as you see it, not necessarily as it is, onto canvas, about capturing the landscape or the scene before you before it changes. In a way, it can be like taking a picture of a scene, but with your hand and a paintbrush and not with a camera. Of course, the scene doesn’t freeze itself like a movie still so you can get it all onto the canvas. No, it continues changing. The sunlight keeps moving, shadows keep shifting, colors start to change in front of your eyes.

So what’s the result of trying to paint a single, changing instant? Landscapes and city scenes that might be described as hastily painted, unfinished, or messy. Sometimes the result is unidentifiable (Monet’s *Haystacks* is a favored example in the “Impressionism” course), but other times it’s clear what the subject is despite the messy outlines and blotches of color (like Edgar Degas’ *Dancers*, *Pink and Green*). Regardless of how unidentifiable or messy impressionist paintings may appear, they all share a focus on light, shadow, and color. Along with the obsession of catching a single and ironically constantly changing moment, impressionist artists focus on the impressions that stick with them most.



Haystacks (Effect of Sun and Snow)

But how does that apply to literature? In the same way that impressionist paintings are concerned with capturing a single visual moment and portraying an initial impression of that scene to their viewers, impressionist literature can use words to paint a picture in our heads, calling attention to color and light in a scene. Similar to how the shadows of Monet’s *Haystacks* don’t line up, suggesting that Monet had taken long enough that the sun had drastically moved across the sky by the time he got to the second haystack, words can depict a tide in the process of rising or receding, a sun moving below the horizon, dawn creeping across the sky. But impressionist literature and poetry can go beyond the visual. They use words to immerse the reader in sensations or moments of transition, whether these are striking, visual moments that suggest more than they say—for example, in novels like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*—or ambiguous, sensory experiences in poems like Rosamund Marriott Watson’s “A Summer Night.”

Of course, there’s more to visual art than just impressionist paintings, more even than just paintings themselves. Another course in the English department takes what could be considered a humbler approach: “The Rise of the Graphic Novel,” taught by Professor



Teresa Feroli, is entirely focused on the art of the comic book. It might be unexpected to encounter “kids” comics like *Spiderman* and *The Fantastic Four* as required reading in a college course, but it can be a refreshing and interesting change from the literary classics we’ve had to read.

“The Rise of the Graphic Novel” focuses on how words and art (can) work together to tell a story. Within a comic, sometimes words only function as dialogue and quick ways to label a location or time; sometimes they describe the image in a panel and provide more information for or narrate alongside the image; and other times they contrast with the image or images they’re paired with to provide completely different information that can evoke a certain tone or atmosphere. The course often focuses on the characters of the comic and the story as a whole, but the art itself is an equally important aspect. Panels might overlap in a way that reflects the storyline, and the borders of the panels or the physical setting of a scene might frame its characters in a way that suggests their freedom or constraint, like in Will Eisner’s *Cookalein* and *The Super* or in Rick Geary’s *The Saga of the Bloody Benders*. In the same way that novels and poems use words, syntax, and even paragraph or line breaks to convey certain thoughts, ideas, or moods, comics—like any other form of visual art—use their own traits (color, dialogue bubbles, panels and the gutter space between them, to name a few) to convey those same things. This is, of course, applicable to film as well, as is suggested by two more undergraduate courses being taught this semester that explore the visual alongside the literary: “Shakespeare and Film,” taught by Visiting Professor Jenny Mann, and “Contemporary Irish Literature and Film,” taught by Professor Kelly Sullivan.

In the context of an English course or not, visual art can offer a challenging or even refreshing chance to use the analytical skills you’ve honed in your literature classes in a new way. While it’s too late to join any of these courses this spring semester, there are numerous opportunities to take a different, visual perspective on things. There are many art galleries here on campus—within Bobst, Kimmel, and a number of other places listed on this site that you can visit for a chance at the visual aspect of English studies. Getting up close and personal with a few paintings might even help you to reconnect with the art of words.

DEPARTMENT NEWS IN BRIEF

A hearty congratulations to **Professors Jeff Spear and Larry Lockridge** on their retirement. We'll miss them!

Congratulations also to this month's graduating MA students—**Anthony Americo, Robert Magella, Tanya Schmidt,** and **Peter Tasca**—and PhD students: **Spencer Donald Keralis, Marcela DiBlasi, Carla Thomas,** and **Rachael Wilson!**

English major **Alex Braverman** is the valedictorian of the College of Arts and Sciences. For more on Alex's thesis, see p. 7.

Graduating senior **Megan Steiner** received the Dean's Award for Scholarship, presented for academic excellence and achievement in the Humanities. The Michael L. Owen Prize, Presented to a freshman or sophomore who has declared an English Major and who has achieved the highest academic distinction, has been awarded to **Sim Wee Ong** and **Annesha Sengupta**. The Vocal Interpretation Prize for majors goes to **Kashif Ravasia**. (For more on this semester's departmental prizes, see p. 7.)

Professor **Pat Crain's** new book *Reading Children: Literacy, Property, and the Dilemmas of Childhood in Nineteenth-Century America* has been published by University of Pennsylvania Press.

Professors **Phillip Brian Harper** and **John Guillory** both received Golden Dozen Teaching Awards this year.

Professor **Elaine Freedgood's** book *The Ideas in Things* is being translated into Polish.

Professor **Hal Momma** has been awarded a Fellowship at the Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study.

Professor **Martha Rust** is currently holding an NEH Huntington Library Academic Year Fellowship.

Professor **Tomás Noel** was promoted with tenure this year. He has received a Howard Foundation Fellowship for work on his upcoming monograph.

Recent English PhDs **Mo Pareles** and **John Easterbrook** have gotten tenure track jobs at the University of British Columbia and California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, respectively.

Professor **Greg Vargo's** article "Questions from Workers who Read: Education and Self-Formation in Chartist Print Culture and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*" was published in *Victorian Literature and Culture* 44.1 (Winter 2016).

Professor **Nicholas Boggs** has received a residential fellowship from the Yaddo artist's colony in Saratoga Springs, New York for December 2016/January 2017 to continue work on his book-in-progress about James Baldwin's collaboration with French painter, Yoran Cazac.

Professor **Maureen N. McLane** has a new book coming out in mid-May: *Mz N: the serial: a poem-in-episodes* (FSG). In late May she'll be giving readings and talks on poetics in Oxford, Cambridge, and at the LRB bookshop.

Professor **Sylvia Marks** published a review of *Samuel Richardson: Early Works in The Scriblerian* (Autumn 2014), and presented papers at the Arthur Miller Centennial Conference and the East-Central Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies.

Professor **Julia Jarcho's** new play *Every Angel Is Brutal*, a dark spy thriller, will premiere in Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks festival, May 27-June 6. For info and tickets, please visit <http://www.clubbedthumb.org/>.

Alumni News Item! **Dr. Katherine D. Harris (MA 1999) writes:

I earned my MA from NYU's English Department in 1999 and went on to earn a PhD in literature from The Graduate Center CUNY in 2005. In August 2005, I began my journey as an Assistant Professor in the English & Comparative Literature Department at San Jose State University (one of the California State Universities) where I earned tenure and promotion to Associate Professor. I write with news of my freshly-published literary history, *Forget Me Not: The Rise of the British Literary Annual 1823-1835* (Ohio UP 2015). It was a very long road to get this literary history published with 60+ images, appendices, and all the chapters that were relevant to the study. (The only concession the press couldn't make was to use footnotes.) Working with Marilyn Gaull (who is now at Boston University) was integral to developing my scholarly voice in writing literary history.

ALUMNI!

If you have news you would like to share with the Department, please send it to:

alyssa.leal@nyu.edu.

A SALUTE TO LARRY LOCKRIDGE, ON THE OCCASION OF HIS RETIREMENT

To Larry, the original LL Cool J emceeding the deathless Romantic-philosophical Jam—

Who expresses in his person a Unity-in-Multeity (to invoke his brilliantly elucidated Coleridge)—

A man of many parts, Larry possesses all the virtues and none of the vices of British Romantics—to wit:

- the worldly satirical panache of Byron
- the profound *humanitas* of Wordsworth
- the negative capability of Keats
- the philosophical capacities of Coleridge
- the numinous categorical rigor of Kant
- the progressive sexual politics of Wollstonecraft
- the aesthetic acuity of Burke
- the conversable liberalism of Helen Maria Williams
- the socio-critical insight of Blake
- the essayistic critical vigor of Hazlitt
- the musicality of Shelley
- the biographical flair of Scott

Larry has truly practiced what Coleridge called a “genial criticism,” grounded in the generalizable capacities of the human being. “Literature is a phase of life,” Marianne Moore wrote: “If one is afraid of it, the situation is irremediable.” Larry has not been afraid of it: life, literature, a profoundly ethical criticism. He has shone and will continue to shine his singular light. “Where there is personal liking we go,” wrote Moore, in “The Hero.” With our hero, then, we go—as he goes toward retirement and new projects, and we all go, with him, toward a continued enriching friendship.

--Maureen N. McLane

