

# In Theory



CORNELL UNIVERSITY  
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## A Word from the Director



**Amanda Anderson**  
*Andrew W. Mellon  
Professor of Humanities  
and English,  
Brown University*

Given that we now self-consciously inhabit the epoch of the anthropocene and the threat of ecological catastrophe, how do we reframe our approaches to forms of criticism and theory that have relied on what now seems a blinkered understanding of the place of humans in history and the world?

How do “the new materialisms”—as they have emerged across several disciplines and areas of inquiry—help us to reconceptualize the relation of the human to the nonhuman world? How can the literary history of intellectual disability help us to rethink the relation

between narrative self-consciousness and neuroatypicality? What are the particular contributions and perspectives offered by contemporary design theory, and how might design-literacy more broadly feed into the methods and frameworks of humanistic scholarship?

These questions and more were taken up in the six-week seminars of the 2013 session of the SCT, serving as the basis for extended discussion both within seminars and beyond—in the lecture hall, in the colloquium auditorium, and at the many social events that contribute to the richness of the SCT experience. The six-week faculty, Ian Baucom (Duke University), Jane Bennett (Johns Hopkins University), Michael Bérubé (Penn State University), and Julia Reinhard Lupton (University of California, Irvine), participated with great energy in the intellectual and social life of the session, and I am very grateful to them all for making the 2013 program so vibrant and successful. Their core seminars were

amplified by a thought-provoking set of mini-seminars and public lectures addressing “secular re-enchantment” (Akeel Bilgrami), mood and method in contemporary critique (Rita Felski), affect theory and neuroscience (Catherine Malabou), “democratic animism” (Achille Mbembe), species evolution and cultural freedom (William Connolly), and theories of autism (Joseph Valente).

I invite you to read the participant essays that follow, which individually and collectively provide a vivid sense of last summer’s experience. They capture the range 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 formal settings. As in previous years, we had a large and interesting mix of participants: we welcomed participants from 63 institutions of higher learning, including 20 institutions outside of the U.S. We are also continuing to draw participants from a diverse range of intellectual disciplines. While SCT has historically had a strong number of participants in literature, we attract participants each year from a range of humanities and social sciences disciplines. In 2013 we had representation from the fields of history, political science, Africana studies, American studies, film and media, women’s studies, religion, performance studies, and art. We publicize the program through a number of channels, but more than anything else we rely on word of mouth and hope that alumni will recommend the program to potentially interested colleagues. As in the past, we also continue to benefit from well-established relationships with many leading institutions that sponsor participants annually.

Please take note of the line-up for 2014, listed on the following page. Full information about the upcoming session and the SCT can be found on our website (<http://sct.cornell.edu/>).

## ANNUAL SCT RECEPTION AT MLA

The annual SCT reception at the MLA will be held on Saturday, January 11th, from 7:00-8:15pm in Chicago D, Chicago 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 and mingle, 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!

## 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 Alice Cho, Program Administrator, [sectcornell-mailbox@cornell.edu](mailto:sectcornell-mailbox@cornell.edu).

Please visit our website at <http://sct.cornell.edu> or find us on Facebook. We look forward to hearing from you.

2014 Summer Session  
June 15 - July 25

### 2014 Faculty 6-Week Seminars

#### Simon Critchley

Hans Jonas Professor in Philosophy,  
New School for Social Research  
"Tragedy As Philosophy"

#### Mark B. N. Hansen

Professor, Program in Literature, Program in  
Media Arts and Sciences, Department of Art,  
Art History and Visual Studies,  
Duke University  
"Media Between Data and Experience"

#### Sianne Ngai

Professor of English, Stanford University  
"The Contemporary"

#### Annelise Riles

Jack G. Clarke '52 Professor of Law in Far East  
Legal Studies, Professor of Anthropology, and  
Director, Clarke Program in East Asian Law and  
Culture, Cornell University  
"Theorizing the Gift: Law, Markets, Love"

### Mini-Seminars

#### Leela Gandhi

Professor of English, University of Chicago  
"Moral Imperfection: An Ethics for Democracy"

#### Ursula K. Heise

Professor, Department of English/Institute of  
the Environment and Sustainability,  
University of California, Los Angeles  
"BioCities: Urban Ecology and the Cultural  
Imagination"

#### Christopher Newfield

Professor of Literature and American Studies,  
English Department, University of California,  
Santa Barbara  
"Critical Theory and the Post-Capitalist  
University"

#### Tricia Rose

Director, Center for the Study of Race and  
Ethnicity in America, and Professor of  
Africana Studies, Brown University  
"Black Popular Culture in the Age of  
Color-Blindness and Mass Cultural  
Commodification"

Applications from faculty members  
and advanced graduate students at  
universities worldwide will be  
reviewed beginning February 1, 2014.

For online application and program  
information:

<http://sct.cornell.edu/>

## Reflections on SCT 2013

Perhaps the two most famous visual representations of scholarly inquiry—the eerily similar paintings titled *The Geographer* and *The Astronomer* (both. c. 1668) by Johannes Vermeer—portray a solitary male figure immersed in intellectual activity. Confined in a closed room with a singular source of light, the scholar turns his eyes not on the phenomena he is analyzing, but on their visual representations—a nautical map and a celestial globe. In this model—which Jonathan Crary identifies as the epistemological model of the *camera obscura*—academic work results from the separation of bodily sensations and experiences from the ever-changing phenomena of the studied field. In order to understand the world, the geographer and astronomer have to withdraw from it.

Although Ithaca (as well as the elevated location of Cornell University's campus) may seem like a site of withdrawal, after a few days it became obvious that the style of conducting academic work at SCT had nothing to do with a solitary pursuit of knowledge. It was refreshing to see the different ways you could perform academic work and its various

manifestations. I was fascinated by the variety of styles of asking questions—ranging from the short, innocent, and yet incisive, through the slightly messy but all the more brilliant, to the long, fully developed and ending with sharp-witted punch lines. Different manners of note taking revealed the variety of ways in which one could absorb and register knowledge—while some of us speed-typed through lectures, others wrote down the main arguments in capitalized letters, yet others used complicated note-taking programs that allowed them to illustrate their notes with doodles. Some took no notes at all, placing perhaps too much trust in the plasticity of their brains, to invoke the concept of one of the guest faculty members at this year's SCT—Catherine Malabou. It quickly became obvious that every faculty member and participant brought with her a deeply distinctive way of thinking, a unique archive of academic texts and cultural references as well as a particular way of presenting it. I took pleasure sharing my archive with others, adding new index cards to my own, was fascinated by the multiplicity of the forms of academic performance, and enjoyed reflecting on new rhetorical styles.



Faculty and participants at the SCT registration picnic, A.D. White House garden

Of course, SCT wasn't only about the observations of academic styles, postures, and manners (although, after Jane Bennett's lecture on the "manners of democracy" in Walt Whitman's poetry, we can now examine their political potential) and not only about impassioned debates on the precarious condition of young scholars and the future of the humanities, but most importantly about in-depth academic inquiry and exchange. Its main venue was the six-week-long seminar—in my case Ian Baucom's "Postcolonial Studies in the Era of the Anthropocene." The seminar began with a reading of Dipesh Chakrabarty's now classic *Provincializing Europe* along with the author's newer essays, in which he significantly revises not only his earlier theses, but also his vision of the field of postcolonial studies. According to Chakrabarty, in the era of the anthropocene—"the new geological epoch when humans exist as a geological force"—humanities scholars should integrate the investigation of particular histories and emancipatory struggles into a wider consideration of a new politics of the human species. In the light of pending ecological doom, it is necessary for the human collective, the new "we" interpellated by our own destructive actions, to design "a global approach to politics."

Our conversations, which were

thoughtfully moderated by Ian Baucom, struggled with this call for universality—seemingly recognizing its necessity (aren't "we" all affected by ecological disasters?), but simultaneously doubting the common foundation of the universal human species (are "we" all really equally responsible for the anthropocene and are "we" all affected by it on equal terms?). Our heated discussions about works by such thinkers as Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett, along with the multiple and incredibly inspiring theoretical references brought into the seminar by Ian Baucom, helped us explore the difficult relation between the incommensurable scales of human and natural history, the possibility of building a collective of human and non-human actors, the limitations and challenges of political ecology, and the role that aesthetic works have to play within this new, redefined realm of politics. Going back to these discussions, I remain inspired by many of the points we arrived at and the spirit of scholarly congeniality we fostered. We and not "we," as we truly did draw and build on one another's thoughts day after day—the *I'd like to go back to what Paul said's* or *drawing on what Michaela reminded us of's* quickly became the refrains of our discussions.

One of the many things I took back with me from SCT was a long reading

list: scribbled at the back of my seminar notebook it contained the multiple textual references—"read Meillasoux," "finish lectures by Latour," "go back to that essay by Derrida"—pointed towards by faculty members and participants. Adding new points to the list, I would usually write down who the text was referenced by and in what context (we started grasping the differences between lectures, seminars, mini-seminars and colloquia after the second, well maybe third, week...), creating a messy mind map of discursive affiliations, connections, and affairs. A separate theory chart could have been drawn up from the many exuberant parties, bar outings, and trips, where academic talk was really taken to the next level (at some point you just have to stop taking notes though). Looking at the reading list now, I am both slightly paralyzed by the impossibility of completing it and thrilled at the memory of the vibrant intellectual life that I was so lucky to participate in. Yet, what remains with me most are the memories of long conversations with new friends, conversations founded on a feeling of solidarity, and a sense of hopefulness about the possibility of building new collectives through academic work.

Magda Szcześniak  
University of Warsaw



SCT faculty with participants at social events. Clockwise from top left: Jane Bennett (right); Michael Bérubé (left); Julia Reinhard Lupton (right); Ian Baucom (right).

One morning in seminar, our fearless leader Michael Bérubé distributed around the table a short excerpt from *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which Virginia Woolf describes a character “overcome with his own grief, which rose like a moon looked at from a terrace, ghastly beautiful with light from the sunken day.” In the novel’s next sentence, the grief-stricken figure, Peter Walsh, puts his hand out toward Clarissa Dalloway, pulling her into the metaphor alongside him: “There above them it hung, that moon. She too seemed to be sitting with him on the terrace, in the moonlight.” With remarkable economy, Woolf’s sentences set before us one of the central problems we’d been grappling with in our seminar all summer: how is it that literature offers such a unique, and seemingly unmatched, mode of navigating the traffic that takes place between the minds of separate people? What specific resources does literature bring to the venerably irresolvable problem—tackled over the centuries by philosophers, artists, mystics, and now neurobiologists and cognitive scientists—of accessing, knowing, and even “entering” mental states that are not one’s own? Or, as Bérubé excitedly put the question to us: *What is it about that moon?*

But if Peter and Clarissa’s shared grief offered us one point of entry to the themes of our course, it didn’t get us all the way there. Our more specific concern this summer lay in exploring how the mechanisms of literary narrative can themselves be warped and transformed by the presence of characters with atypical or disabled mental capacities. Why is the literary such a powerful register for exploring the minds of characters who are seemingly unable to distinguish their own thoughts and experiences from those of others? The scope of this question, it turns out, is remarkably far-reaching. If, as Tobin Siebers has argued, disability functions as a “master trope of human disqualification,” the disabled or atypical mind and/or brain challenges us to think differently about who is and who is not accorded the status of personhood. Guided by Bérubé’s unflagging enthusiasm (and seemingly effortless command of at least the last century’s worth of literature, theory, and cultural history), our seminar traversed an often head-spinning succession of further

issues, as impressively diverse as the interests of the seminar’s participants. We considered, for instance, recent attempts to use cognitive psychology to explain why readers care about fictional characters; current controversies over legal surrogacy for the intellectually disabled; the “glitchy” avatars created in online disability communities; and the seductively deranging representations of alternative cognitive styles found in J.M. Coetzee’s *The Life and Times of Michael K.* and Philip K. Dick’s *Martian Time-Slip*.

**“My time at SCT made me hopeful that our scholarly practices might be transformed by more fully acknowledging the various ways that different minds and bodies have of attuning to one another.”**

In pursuing the question of “other minds” through the specific lens of intellectual disability, our seminar brought together two separate scholarly conversations that have, thus far, overlapped very little: disability studies, which has long been critical of the normalizing tendencies of scientific and medical knowledge, and the current vogue for so-called Darwinian literary studies and “evolutionary criticism,” itself part of a broader “turn to science” that disciplines across the humanities seem to have taken in recent years. Many of us felt a pressing need to develop more skeptical attitudes toward the authority of “science” than was to be found in some of the work that we read from the latter category. There were contentious moments: what else to expect from a roomful of theory-heads confronting scholarship that was, in some cases, openly hostile to the qualities that drew so many of us to pursue graduate work in the humanities in the first place? And yet there was something undeniably useful, and even invigorating, in encountering ideas that seemed to go against many of our deeply held critical impulses. It allowed us to discuss how longstanding debates about (for instance) the instability of language, the function of ideology, and the role of history in the development of scientific reason still provide an indispensable counterweight to the overly gleeful embrace, in some precincts, of what science can now tell us about the human brain, mind, and self. Indeed, the darker chapters in the history of disability—including various

forms of institutionalization, eugenics, even genocide—teach us all too well the hazards of uncritically acquiescing to the authority of those claiming access to scientific truth.

Though disability studies is still a small and often marginalized academic field, I would like to think our collective encounter with its methods, commitments, and modes of thought at the SCT this summer might prove salutary, even for those of us whose

research interests seem to lie quite far afield from disability studies per se. Academics in general, and particularly those of us in the hothouse of graduate school, are easily enthralled by virtuosic, solo feats of intellectual mastery, which often seem to require superhuman abilities of mind and body. Engaging

with disability as both a trope and a provocation for theoretical reflection might encourage us to cultivate styles of thinking, and being, that are less alienated from the everyday messiness of experience than the largely disembodied, “critical” voice many of us have been trained to adopt. What new modes of scholarship might become available by slowing down and lingering with a problem while setting aside the overweening ambition to conquer it, or conceptualizing intellectual labor in terms that are less relentlessly individual?

My time at SCT made me hopeful that our scholarly practices might be transformed by more fully acknowledging the various ways that different minds and bodies have of attuning to one another. In informal late-night reading groups, heady discussions underneath waterfalls, or simply sitting together on Cornell’s Arts Quad after a heated seminar discussion, the ethos of conviviality to be found at SCT provided an almost ideal (and certainly idyllic) environment in which to experiment with some of these possibilities. A bit like Peter Walsh and Clarissa Dalloway’s moonlit terrace (though without, thankfully, the pang of grief!), our summer together in Ithaca offered a glimpse of other modes of affiliation and collective contemplation that may yet become possible.

Leon Hilton  
New York University

In her public lecture, one of the many given by scholars visiting the School of Criticism and Theory this past summer, Catherine Malabou delivered a grim diagnosis. She argued that our contemporary condition is characterized by “indifference,” that is, the destruction of affect. Battered by the everyday violence of twenty-first century living, we are increasingly incapable of being concerned or moved by anything at all. Indifference, warned Malabou, is a far more serious impairment than the temporary state of boredom or despondency. More horrifically, we are actually beginning to resemble patients with severe cerebral disease or trauma. Drawing on neurobiological research, Malabou was not speaking metaphorically. The social world damages the psyche more slowly but no less powerfully than a bullet to the brain’s frontal lobes.

Malabou’s remarks didn’t feel quite right. In the midst of an intensely affective summer, cerebral degeneration felt like no more than a distant and hypothetical threat. Affect has been theorized as an ambient force outside of conscious knowing—circulating across the blurry boundaries of people and things—that may impel thought and practice. I found affect to work this way at the SCT: our collective experiments in thought were

set in motion by a wide range of affective forces and intensities. Looking back, I find it difficult to disentangle the ideas I encountered from the affective strands with and through which they were woven.

The six-week seminar with Jane Bennett, “A Political Ecology of Things,” in which I was enrolled, was a case in point. Its new materialist invitation to explore the power of things—huckleberries, balloons, plastic bags, gleaned potatoes, broad-axes, border walls, and planets, amongst other unorthodox objects of philosophical inquiry—required not only intellectual openness but also affective flexibility. Far away from our disciplinary havens and emboldened by Bennett’s example and direction, we cultivated a space in which, like Thoreau at Walden, a “slight insanity of mood”—not a cool indifference—ruled the day. In the seminar (and around its edges) we slowed down the typical drive towards mastery to saunter a bit more leisurely, in our common slight insanity, among many lush new materials: Whitehead’s ingressing cosmos; the spontaneous morphogenesis of Bergson; the noisy, clamoring multiplicity of Serres; Darwin’s climbing plants; Perec’s playful lists; Whitman’s aching eros for vegetal matter; the affirmations and goings-under of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra; the refrains of Deleuze and Guattari; Bennett’s onto-

sympathy; the vitality of Ithaca’s gorges and slime molds.

Affective intensities extended beyond the seminar room as well. There was plenty of warmth and even joy, especially as I grew accustomed to the pleasant feeling of decompression after a long and stimulating day, feeding into the humming energies of a garden party with friends, food, and drink. There were also the familiar satisfactions of a hermeneutics of suspicion, deftly applied by visiting scholars like Achille Mbembe who unmasked the capitalist subjectivity driving new materialisms, and Rita Felski in her colorful critique of critique.

We also moved on the far side of the affective spectrum. With new ideas sometimes came anxiety, accompanying Amanda Anderson’s analysis of the state of the humanities as well as Ian Baucom’s frank discussion of the anthropocene and its portents of environmental devastation. There was also disorientation as I left the comforts of my own department and encountered different methods, commitments, and vernaculars. Finally, there was some anger and frustration. The last colloquium was tense. As the temperature rose in the hall, so too did the voracity of questioning along with our collective blood pressure. Over the course of our summer idyll, several students pointed out, a Florida court acquitted Trayvon Martin’s killer, Detroit filed for bankruptcy, and my home state of North Carolina passed the most regressive voting laws seen since the Gilded Age. What have we done here, it was demanded, to remit these wrongs? Where was the practice in our criticism and theory? Satisfying answers were not easily won, but not for a pathos of indifference or a want of affect. On the contrary, the upsurge of thoughtful debate commingled with the upsurge of affect that day. Rigorous thinking and passionate feeling went hand in hand.

Slight insanity, warmth, satisfaction, anxiety, disorientation, and anger—the summer of 2013 was a boisterous hubbub of all these affective forces. If Malabou is right, and I hope she is not, I think she may at least need to account for the deeply affective dimensions of critical and theoretical endeavors themselves, of which the School of Criticism and Theory is an exceptional example.

Sonia Hazard  
Duke University



*SCT Director Amanda Anderson speaks at the Garden Party.*



*SCT faculty and participants enjoy weekly receptions in the A.D. White House garden.  
Top right: Rita Felski (right).*

Attending SCT came at a particularly fortuitous time in my scholarly development. Between my MA and PhD work, I calculated I had taken nineteen classes at the graduate level (and audited one more), so when I finally completed my exams and moved on to the dissertation stage, I viewed it as a crucial milestone in the transition from student to scholar. A year later, after completing a proposal and teaching my first course, I found myself back in the seminar room for Julia Reinhard Lupton's "Dwelling | Telling | Selling: Contemporary Design Topographies." Despite being so ready to "move on" a mere twelve months earlier, it was extraordinarily refreshing to once again participate in a directed course of study alongside other graduate students whose individual passions had led them to align their interests under a broader topic. More importantly, the experience formed the core of what is perhaps the most important lesson I learned throughout the seminars, guest lectures, mini-seminars, presentations, and receptions that both constitute SCT and make it so remarkable: that, as a scholar, one is never done being

a student, and that there is quite possibly no better place to further that type of learning than together with other scholars in an idyllic setting specifically structured around that purpose.

This is all to say that SCT seminars are not simply graduate seminars any more than SCT is like graduate school; they are their own entities entirely. Even in the context of my extensively interdisciplinary graduate training, I can safely say that I have rarely, if ever, participated in a seminar with such a wide range of disciplines, backgrounds, and scholarly interests represented. Enumerating the disciplines represented, from Art History, Communications, Religious Studies, and individual language and literature departments to SCT mainstays English and Comparative Literature, only begins to give a sense of the interests and expertise on hand, which ranged from modernism and metafiction to nineteenth-century seafaring, Quebecois comedic performance, live-action role playing, queer subcultures, and the politics of borderland cultural appropriation in the fashion industry, not to mention a surprisingly large contingent working

on graphic novels, comic books, and other forms of sequential art. Locating and organizing these disparate interests in relation both to each other and the themes of the seminar could never be an easy task, yet it was one that Julia Lupton was seemingly uniquely suited for. A Shakespeare scholar who has written extensively on political theory, her innovative work bridging eras and modes of thought (in particular, relating Shakespeare to Hannah Arendt—not necessarily a conjunction that springs immediately to mind, at least for this former English major) was here augmented by her work on design, including two books co-written with her sister, Ellen Lupton, herself a designer and curator of no small renown. With her current project, a synthesis of these two areas of interest via a consideration of design in the Shakespearean theatre, serving as the impetus for the seminar, Lupton was able to provide a context both theoretically rich, incorporating Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Situationist urbanism, and Autonomist Marxism, as well as empirically broad, ranging from classical architectural treatises to nineteenth-century American homemaking manuals



SCT faculty give public lectures (Top from left to right: Achille Mbembe, Amanda Anderson, Akeel Bilgrami; Bottom left: Catherine Malabou; Bottom right: SCT participants)

to the contemporary “maker” movement. Such a spectrum proved immensely capable of not merely speaking to but—more importantly—connecting our disparate, individual interests.

Divided into three two-week sections, the seminar began with “Dwelling,” focusing on questions related to architecture and place, especially in relation to Heidegger and Arendt. What does it mean to dwell, as Heidegger suggests? Is there a kind of dwelling that we can identify as valuable and useful for us today, some sixty years on from his famous speech to an audience of architects in that ideological and cultural hub of post-war European reconstruction, Darmstadt? How does the notion of dwelling, understood as “the routines and needs of life,” connect with Arendt’s conception of the *vita activa* and the classical distinction between public and private space, a distinction which itself increasingly comes under erasure in a networked, post-Fordist era in which continual, 24/7 connections are rapidly becoming the default modes of being? From there, we moved on to “Telling,” emphasizing the increasing importance of design in constructing contemporary,

postmodern narratives based around interactions between people and objects. For example, how might James Gibson’s influential theorizations of affordances, or the usages that an object facilitates, contribute to New Materialism and other recent considerations of the agency of objects? In a particularly serendipitous turn, Gibson’s own work in this setting provided us with a prime demonstration of his theory; having been a professor at Cornell, Gibson’s papers are entrusted to an archive on campus, thus affording our seminar a deeper engagement with his work. Finally, we concluded with a section on “Selling,” considering the increasingly indistinguishable overlap between contemporary design and late capitalism, with an emphasis on Autonomist analyses of branding, especially as reflected in recent attempts to market “immaterial” qualities such as experiences and environments. As an added bonus we were able to mix our theory with practice, both throughout the seminar, thanks to Lupton’s incredibly well-designed and effective visual presentations, and at the end, when she ran a supplementary session on basic design principles.

As a scholar of digital media turning a critical eye on the practices and ideologies of informational capitalism, I found the latter sections of the seminar most useful for my own, current project, a study of digital multimedia convergence in conjunction with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of state communism, and the beginning of a newly global socioeconomic order. Yet not only the other parts of the seminar but SCT as a whole, including presentations from SCT faculty members and thought-provoking visits from scholars such as Achille Mbembe and Catherine Malabou, not to mention Ithaca’s unparalleled natural beauty and the infectious enthusiasm of my colleagues in the program, served to remind me of the benefits of a lifelong dedication to learning. Perhaps this, then—for an academic, at least—is what it means, however briefly, to dwell.

Andrew Lison  
Brown University

**T**he School of Criticism and Theory is sometimes described as an academic conference stretched out over six weeks, and there is some truth in this.

The intensity of discussion, the sense of urgency and freshness in established scholars presenting new work and work in progress, and the remarkable feeling of participating in a larger conversation, with palpable stakes, are features that the SCT has in common with a great conference. Many conferences, as well, share with the SCT the sense of adventure that comes from being thrown into a new place with new people, and that gives rise to exuberant post-seminar socializing, a radical openness to new perspectives, and a willingness to take risks (intellectual and otherwise).

Yet in a few key ways, the School of Criticism and Theory is nothing like an academic conference. For one thing, a real community develops over the six weeks of SCT, whereas conferences tend to reinforce or draw on previously existing communities. For another, conferences tend to be either tightly focused or inclusively hodgepodge, where SCT offers something in the middle—a few salient lines of thought that speak to and illuminate each other. Most important, for the few weeks you're at SCT, you're not on the market. You're not competing in some subtle game of departmental or disciplinary ranking. You're not positioning yourself in a field. When you walk into a seminar at SCT, you are there as a thinker engaging with other thinkers.

The appeal this idea held for me was almost physical. The promise of pure intellectual exploration seemed idyllic, even utopian. Still, as I considered applying to SCT, I was concerned that none of the seminars spoke directly to my dissertation topic, and I worried about what six weeks would cost me in terms of my own research. I was anxious that I might be choosing a kind of dilettantism over the more rigorous demands of expertise.

My dissertation, *The Lost War: World War II in American Literature, 1945-1975*, investigates the dominance of traumatic narratives in canonical literary representations of World War II, and works to recuperate an "other tradition" that abjures trauma in favor of more

ambiguous, resistant, and complex understandings of power, violence, and social identity. I wasn't entirely sure how Ian Baucom's seminar, "Postcolonial Studies in the Era of the Anthropocene," would illuminate my topic, but I thought it would be helpful for me to learn more about postcolonial theory and to think through theoretical problems around historicity, the concept of an epoch or era, and the idea of the Event. As it turned out, the questions we asked in seminar about the anthropocene were often directly related to contextual questions I was asking about World War II: How do we understand the relation between a global event and local politics? How does the historical apprehension of humanity as a mass or a species affect humanist thought and aesthetics? As technological development exceeds comprehensibility, rationality, and even agency, how do we use art and literature to represent our unstable imaginings of the future—and of the present? And does the threat of human extinction require a wholesale rethinking of history, culture, and politics?

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As we read the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, Donna Haraway, and Jane Bennett, wrestling with questions of ethics, ontology, and politics on a world-wide scale, Ian Baucom encouraged us to bring our own work and interests to bear. Our already rich discussion grew richer as my fellow participants folded in queer temporalities, Inuit knowledge, the art of Spencer Tunick and Edward Burtynsky, Kropotkin, film studies, Sri Lankan literature, and Christian Bök's genetic poetry. The seminar joined critical rigor and cosmopolitan heterogeneity in a way that manifested the very best of what interdisciplinarity can mean.

Ian Baucom's seminar, for those of us in it, inflected and colored everything else we did, from "Anthropocene Movie Night" to the kinds of questions we raised in the weekly lectures and mini-seminars. As the weeks went on, conversations grew deeper and more nuanced as we all attended the same talks and considered the same problems. Amanda Anderson and the rest of the faculty fostered a sense of cooperative seriousness, pushing participants and each other on difficult points, attending to each other's work with generosity and rigor, and sharing with us their doubts and concerns. It seemed not just that we were creating a community, but that we were engaging in a rare and potent kind of critical collective thought—a real "school."

At the same time, some of my most valuable experiences in Ithaca took place outside the formal rubric of seminars and lectures: running along Fall Creek and around Beebe Lake, talking about philosophy with Ian Baucom and postwar liberalism with Amanda Anderson, meeting with an informal reading group on "War, Conflict, and the Event," and getting to know some of my fellow students one-on-one. I found plenty of time, as well, to do my own research. In fact, I came to my own work refreshed and energized by the enthusiasm, acuity, and diversity of thought all around me. It was, I believe, the very strength of the sense of collective endeavor that created such a productive space for my own research. My thinking about my project was challenged, expanded, refined, and enlivened by the lush intellectual culture formed at SCT.

The School of Criticism and Theory is sometimes described as an academic conference stretched out over six weeks, but that's not quite right. Even the best conference remains a concatenation of individuals with their own agendas: you put on your nametag, you deliver your paper, and you return home safely the same person you were when you arrived. For six weeks every summer at Cornell, though, the SCT offers something else: the potential and opportunity for change.

Roy Scranton  
Princeton University



*SCT participants enjoy a picnic at Taughannock Falls State Park.*

**C**ritical vitalisms, disability narratives, wonder and indifference, the second coming of animism, enchanted critiques, the anthropocene, onto-sympathy, dwelling, Shakespeare and dessert...these were the sensual themes mulled over, always in the spirit of suspicion, at this year's School of Criticism and Theory session. As the odd student out coming from an information studies department, I initially felt disoriented among the articulate Victorianists, medievalists, and literary scholars. However, by the end of this six-week program of deep cerebral contemplation, dynamic intellectual exchange, and joyous camaraderie amidst the lushness of Ithaca and the elegance of the Cornell University campus, I was flushed with intellectual energy.

SCT must be lived and experienced. I would suggest some prerequisites: an infinite love of theory and its myriad nooks and crannies and a ravenous appetite for intellectual kinship that spills over into coffee, beer, dancing, and waterfalls. Be warned or pleasantly surprised: the inevitability of theory and the week's intellectual dilemmas flooding your daytime and nocturnal activities is to be highly anticipated. As you peruse the organic cereal aisle, your mind is swept away by Chakrabarty's climate history project on the anthropocene (the focus of Ian Baucom's memorable SCT lecture). Contemplating cereals must wait.

I am a game studies scholar exploring the nexus of digital identity, creative play practices, and disability in gaming cultures. I had the privilege to partake in Michael Bérubé's outstanding seminar: "Narrative, Intellectual Disability, and the Boundaries of the Human." I jumped at the chance to explore the nuances, slippages, and tensions of disability as a category of analysis. A remarkable scholar of literature and disability studies, Bérubé graciously led this enriching seminar. We eagerly debated the theoretical frameworks of the seminar: Darwinist approaches to literary analysis, theory of mind, disability aesthetics, and disability metaphors. We interrogated Ato Quayson's "aesthetic nervousness." We passionately disputed "evocriticism." We explored every facet of disability as lived experience, philosophical concept, and master trope of disqualification. It was deep-tissue intellectual massage.

My wildly talented colleagues and friends, some of whom recited Walt Whitman by heart, enchanted me beyond measure. They expanded and guided the discussions with their reflections, evocations, resonances, and dissonances. Our conversations ebbed and flowed, at times turning into rapids, pulling us into assorted currents and vortexes of speculation. This was after all Ithaca, NY, a place of wild waters. I miss those wild waters of intellectual and creative intensity. Not only did we engage with the germane tangents of the day's readings, idea sprouts, and conceptual inclinations in the intellectual spaces of the SCT, but we also engaged with them...over coffee, drinks, or while visiting a waterfall (or two). Not to mention the fun we had at the sumptuous A.D.

White House receptions, the gourmet picnic at Taughannock Falls State Park, the outings to the lush farmer's market, or simply stretched out in the "cocktail lounge" on rainy days, engrossed in our Whitehead. I have never felt such camaraderie with a group of colleagues and new friends whose kindness, generosity, and authenticity warmed my heart. Among the waterfall dips, drinks, steep climbs, and scenic walks, future collaborations took flight, Deleuzian style!

We also witnessed world-class scholars graciously defend their projects at the weekly lectures, mini-seminars, and colloquia. The lectures of the four six-week seminar leaders included Jane Bennett's playful connections between human postures, Whitman, and democracy, Julia Reinhard Lupton's compelling insight on dessert as an architectural affordance for belonging, Ian Baucom's radiant angle on the anthropocene, temporal accumulation, and multi-species politics, and Michael Bérubé's inventive exploration of the fiction-reality frontier in disability narratives.

Also, there was Rita Felski's invitation to soften the sharpness of the "r" in "critique" and acknowledge our enchantment with texts. Catherine Malabou encouraged us to wonder at wonder and the lack thereof in contemporary sociopolitical spheres. In his mini-seminar, Achille Mbembe's riveting Deleuzian reading of Frantz Fanon's selected works captivated us. Amanda Anderson's nuanced analysis of contemporary forces reshaping the humanities emphasized the power of imagination, inspiration, and critical reflection. Anderson's lecture reminded me that humanist work is an art and communion of ideas: an openness and grace, a creative-intellectual largesse to the immediate community, the world, and beyond – exactly the spirit of SCT.

The intellectual jet fuel that was SCT will power and empower me for years to come. I turn to my archived treasury of SCT memorabilia – my photographs, saved readings, papers and notes, YouTube reading group sessions, scribbles and doodles; I turn to the social media posts and emails of my dear SCT friends and future collaborators, and here I am at School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell...

Sandra Danilovic  
University of Toronto

When I told professors at my home institution that I was attending the School of Criticism and Theory, each had a unique, supportive response: “Ithaca is my favorite place”; “This experience will change and better your dissertation”; and from one member of my advisory committee, “I wish I could go with you. This year’s slated speakers are the best I’ve ever seen.” With such a chorus of affirmation—and perhaps a little envy—I left for “gorges” Ithaca, discovering that each comment resonated yet in no way captured the dazzling dimensions of the SCT.

At the SCT, I found the combination of seminars, public lectures, and social gatherings a stimulating platform for what director Amanda Anderson dubbed in her introductory address “live intellectual work.” I discovered that the SCT, as a program, enacts the role of the philosopher that Michel Serres describes in *Genesis*. Instead of dwelling in the realm of the “thinkable,” Serres argues that the philosopher should probe the depths and boundaries of the “unthinkable.” “This is philosophizing,” he affirms, and the SCT too affirms through its attentive selection of thinkers on the vanguard of new contributions to the “multiple” (adopting Serres’s term) worlds of critical theory. It is within these animated worlds that the SCT invites its participants to collectively contribute to new and unthought critical imaginings.

I took part in Jane Bennett’s seminar, “A Political Ecology of Things,” which worked as a forum for understanding and elaborating the evolving field of new materialism. For me, the seminar became an epicenter of the mesmerizing and unexpected. With readings ranging from Walt Whitman and George Perec to films such as Agnes Varda’s *Gleaners and I* and Fiamma Montezemolo’s *Traces/Rastros*, the class sought to evaluate traditional and untraditional sources in the search for a meaningful philosophy of materialism.

### “SCT offers ... a vibrant means to intellectual insight and emerging possibilities.”

Perhaps most surprising to me was our seminar’s unexpected readings of works uncommonly adopted in materialist explorations. For example, we turned to texts from the canon of continental philosophy, like Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and Alfred Whitehead’s *Process and Reality*, to question whether they too may offer new language and methods of evaluation to materialist philosophies. With *Zarathustra*, we asked if the text could be read, not as an allegory or the “gospel of Zarathustra,” but instead as a tale of a wanderer walking the earth, similar to yet divergent from Thoreau’s form of “sauntering.” We also inquired if we could evaluate Zarathustra as a figure demonstrating a strange brand of eco-materialism through his repeated refrain to “remain faithful to the earth.” With Whitehead’s immense work, we performed a similar excavation. While *Process and Reality* has been poorly co-opted for theories in disability studies, as Joseph Valente argued during his public lecture, and retooled for religious schools of thought like process theology, we asked if Whitehead’s work might effectively influence ideas and practices in new materialism. Can we imagine Whitehead’s ambiguous world of “eternal objects” and “actual entities”—the processes of “prehensions,” “ingressions,” and charges of negative and positive “feelings”—as a description of our systems of engagement with the material world? These untraditional, renewed readings of popularly studied texts opened my mind to their capacities for appropriation and contribution to theories in new materialism.

By the end of our six-week seminar, our class reiterated some of our central concerns as questions: How is novelty produced and do we need it for political action? When should scholars enact or withhold acts of judgment and critique in order to examine material interconnectedness and ontological possibilities? Can scholars be humanists without being anthropocentric? And perhaps one of our more polarizing questions: Does new materialism have a feminist or feminine sensibility? Overall, the range of related topics discussed in our seminar, mini-seminars, and public lectures prompted a key acknowledgement that our time constitutes a strange, paradoxical moment in history—a moment where some theories in new materialism call for a move away from human centrality while notions of the anthropocene reinstitute the human as a source of primary agential power.

These questions and conversations were not limited to SCT scheduled events and venues. Part of what makes the SCT the SCT are the participant-organized activities, including dissertation-writing workshops, film screenings, reading groups, etc.

My favorite of these extracurricular activities was an impromptu roundtable comparing historical materialism with new materialism. During this well-attended event, participants from various seminars articulated strengths and weaknesses to both approaches, and discussed ways scholars might use one method or the other to treat a concrete issue like, as our group attempted, Guantanamo Bay.

These numerous intellectual opportunities resulted in a personal epiphany. During Bennett’s seminar and throughout the SCT as a whole there emerged a striking emphasis on the ethics of process and methods of becoming. We situated these themes alongside inquiries on the stakes of stasis, indifference, or damaging repetition—referencing such destructive patterns as human habits of treating waste and the environment or, as Catherine Malabou’s lecture described, the paralyzing effects of a loss of “wonder” and utter “disaffection” in neurobiological, ideological, and embodied senses. These concerns echoed more deeply within me when our class confronted the ethics of process in Serres’s strange lament that we more often use weapons to “stop battle” than “for fighting” itself. In my mind, Serres grieves not the loss of violence but instead the adoption of objects as ends instead of means. For Serres, the problem lies in fetishizing an object rather than seeing it as potentiality itself. His antidote to the devastating effects of repetition and ends lies in his theory of “multiplicity,” which, to me, works as an answer to Whitehead’s call for “a principle of refreshment.” This refreshment principle aims to renew processes, shape original patterns, and arrange new ingressions, such that process never becomes rote repetition, but rather, a site of multiplicity and an emblem of the possible. This emphasis on ends and means resonates not just with my evolving approach to material forces in the world but also with how I view the SCT. For me, the SCT will never function as an end, even though it has ended. It will always be *in process*, as I am a work in progress, contributing in fresh ways to my thinking, my scholarship, and my network of allies in the field of critical theory. In this way, the SCT offers participants like myself a vibrant means to intellectual insight and emerging possibilities.

Julie McCormick Weng  
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Without a doubt, participating in the SCT this summer has been one of the best intellectual experiences of my life. When I first decided to apply for a seminar entitled “*Dwelling | Telling | Selling: Contemporary Design Topographies*,” I was not sure what to expect. After completing my first year as an Assistant Professor of Spanish, I longed to be on the other side and feel like a student again. But at the same time the mixed feelings were overwhelming: I felt nervous, curious, scared, but above all, excited and eager to experience new academic spaces and meet new people. I had no theoretical or practical experience with Design, as I told the class when we introduced ourselves in our first meeting. I had just finished a PhD dissertation on spatial and urban issues a year previously, so I should have felt comfortable with the *Dwelling* section of the seminar, but when Julia Reinhard Lupton handed us the syllabus, I was more concerned than pleased to note my lack of familiarity with most of the readings. They were texts not traditionally studied in literature programs, such as the one I completed. However, this proved to be the best thing that could happen to me as a scholar, since not only did my research interests widen to include subjects I never knew I was interested in, but I also started to look at my own research in a different light.

Faithful to the title of the seminar, Julia Lupton opened the first class with Heidegger’s “*Building, Dwelling, Thinking*” which, no matter how many times you have read it, always surprises. This was the first week and there was nothing introductory about it; it was as intense as it gets. Our conclusions on the Heideggerian concept of dwelling would haunt each and every other discussion throughout the seminar, in which we

put Heidegger in dialogue with Arendt, Gibson, Jacobs, Le Corbusier, and De Bord, among others. We dwelled at length upon concepts such as labor, design, landscape, affordances, action, branding, or post-Fordism in ways that transcended the walls of the classroom and that, for some of us, will surely evolve beyond this summer.

The seminar provided a different and healthy space for the exchanging of ideas. I never thought I could learn so much from—and so productively argue with—a group of twenty individuals from different backgrounds and academic disciplines united by the same topics and themes. The seminar’s success was unquestionably a result of Julia Lupton’s teaching methodology, her ability to listen and find interest in what everyone had to say. A Shakespeare scholar, she brought to class her friendliness, her perceptive thoughts on the materials, and her acute questions. And of course her solid experience in design, well displayed in the creative slides she projected for us every Monday and Wednesday. As an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholar myself, it was refreshing to see how she drew on contemporary spatial discourses for reciprocal illumination of past and present.

But what makes the SCT a unique place is not just the provocative discussions held in the privacy of our seminar. These were just the spark to ignite the fire that would continue to burn in the many public events that the SCT organizes. There is a parallel SCT happening outside the classrooms, just as intensive, just as unforgettable. The public lectures, mini-seminars, and colloquia complemented well the six-week seminar, and left our heads teeming with ideas and questions that would stay with us for hours. All these activities are woven together by the extraordinary work of Alice Cho and SCT

Director Amanda Anderson. Anderson’s incisive and sharp questions in every public lecture and colloquium made all of us in the audience—not just the speaker—reflect, think outside the box, look for answers and critically explore the theoretical implications of our own work. And beyond these public events are the many forms of social networking at SCT, which occur in the Tuesday receptions, the local bars, the halls of Cascadilla, and the many lunch spots on campus.

As a result of my SCT experience, I came back to Dartmouth with several new research topics and works in progress that I excitedly plan to develop in the short-term future. I am going to write an essay on affordances in nineteenth-century Spain, drawing from the discussions in the seminar; another one on the poetics of indifference and wonder in Spanish literature, inspired by the illuminating talk of Catherine Malabou; and I have just proposed a panel at a major conference about dwelling with disabilities, combining the outcome of Julia Lupton’s seminar and Michael Bérubé’s public lecture. I was fortunate enough to meet another participant in my seminar in the Spanish field, and together we came out with a book project—a compilation of critical and theoretical essays in Spanish for undergraduates, a work that simply does not exist at the moment. Needless to say, we were in the perfect setting to develop this kind of project. This is the best example showing that it is possible to unite the personal and the academic in an alliance that will have an impact in years to come.

The SCT is not just about building academic bridges, but personal ones: the people I met and the friendships I made at Cornell strongly marked my summer experience and made dwelling in Ithaca much easier and more enjoyable. Because let’s face it: being away from home, living in a place rented online, and facing a very demanding schedule in the context of the three Hs, as I liked to call them—Heat, Humidity, Hills—made the dwelling experience in Ithaca challenging.

But a challenge easily overcome, since at the end of the day, the only way to think about the SCT is as an exhilarating intellectual atmosphere, enjoyable hiking and swimming, great restaurants, good friends, and stimulating conversation. That’s what I call a summer well spent.

Sara Muñoz-Muriana  
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*SCT faculty and participants attend weekly colloquia.*



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*SCT faculty and participants at Taughannock Falls State Park*