

In Theory



CORNELL UNIVERSITY
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A Word from the Director



Hent de Vries
*Russ Family Professor
in the Humanities and
Philosophy, Director of
The Humanities Center,
Johns Hopkins
University*

Absent any overarching themes, common methods, or overall aims, the current practice of criticism and theory thrives on deeply personal, if shared, intellectual styles. Yet it testifies also to unplanned resonances of decisive global concerns, the apparent universalizing force of singular idioms and the translation of field-

specific concepts into wider contexts that end up by relating to unexpected others without any rule-governed guidance as to how this projection succeeds—as clearly, one is tempted to say, demonstrably—it so often does: creating effects without determining causes, signs without self-given roadmaps in hand, forging new paths each step of the way; and, for its part, criticism operates just as well—indeed, more and more evidently and refreshingly—without established criteria that prejudge its outcomes. The mind and heart learn to wander, the body follows, and—professionally and politically, some would say, spiritually—in the very exercise of this freedom, we all the more grow. Not that anything goes, but much does.

The thirty-eighth session of SCT, held in Ithaca in summer 2014, assembled four six- and four one-week faculty and two guest lecturers, 92 participants and numerous occasional visitors, who over the course of long and intensive weeks distilled a shared vocabulary and understanding across disciplines and boundaries, languages and competences, that might well have seemed forbidding. The beautiful location of Cornell's campus, the interruption of cheers or howls during the 2014 World Cup of soccer that relaxed the brain—it all

resonated with the contemplative mood and energetic flows for which SCT's summer sessions have come to be known. From American hip hop and the British scene that produced David Bowie to science fiction novels saving future biocities in the emerging field of urban ecology and its cultural imagination; from media materialisms, negotiating big data and corporeal experience, to East-Asian markets and the perils of finance capitalism; from the paradox of salvaging the humanities without actually or overly defending them under contemporary capitalism to the cosmic trust Walter Benjamin took in the resurrection of everything and of all; from the legacy of tragedy and the contemporary literary genre or trope of the gimmick and its generic wonders to the revisiting of theological archives as the work that the self exercises upon the self—there developed a conversation that was as unregulated as it was rewarding, the gift of thinking.

New intellectual friendships and projects were forged, old and all too worn-out alliances and positions were happily dropped. And none of this would have been happening were it not for the happy constellation of minds and bodies, souls and hearts, interests and passions that revealed itself there, as those present immersed themselves in seminars and public lectures, in workshops and merriment.

I want to thank the wonderful 2014 faculty and speakers, consisting (in alphabetical order) of Amanda Anderson, Simon Critchley, Leela Gandhi, Mark B. N. Hansen, Ursula K. Heise, Michael W. Jennings, Christopher Newfield, Sianne Ngai, Annelise Riles, and Tricia Rose for their generous and open exchanges that inspired and mobilized the total group of some one hundred interlocutors one could have encountered during the session.

In this edition of SCT's *In Theory* Newsletter, we invite you to read the participant essays to 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 distinct characters of individual seminars as well as the spontaneous relationships and dialogues that developed outside of formal settings.

During this last session, we welcomed participants from 64 institutions of higher learning, including 18 outside of the U.S. We also continued to draw participants from an increasingly diverse range of disciplines. For while SCT has historically had a strong number of participants in literary studies, we now also attract participants from other humanities disciplines, from law schools, and from the social sciences.

We publicize a yearly prospectus, brochure, and poster through a large number of channels, but more than anything else, we rely on word of mouth and hope and trust that especially alumni, former faculty, and lecturers will recommend SCT's summer session to potentially interested peers and colleagues. And, as in the past, we continue to benefit from longstanding relationships with many American and international institutions that sponsor participants annually.

Finally, please take note of the promising line-up of faculty and guest lecturers for 2015, 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 10th, from 7:00-8:15pm in Room West 214, Vancouver Convention Centre, West Building. Past or potential SCT participants have the chance to meet and mingle at this well-attended event. In addition, 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!

2015 Summer Session: June 14 - July 24

Six-Week Seminars

Souleymane Bachir Diagne
Professor of French and Philosophy, and
Faculty Affiliate, Institute for Comparative
Literature and Society, Columbia University
"Scenes of Translation"

Eli Friedlander
Laura Schwarz-Kipp Professor of Modern
Philosophy, Tel Aviv University
"On Affinity: Nature, Language, and Love"

Marie-José Mondzain
Director of Studies, Centre National de la
Recherche Scientifique in Paris
"Imaging Operations: From a Zone of Disorder to
a Field of Freedom"

Sari Nusseibeh
Professor of Philosophy and Former President of
Al-Quds University, Jerusalem
"The Story of Reason In Islam"

Mini-Seminars

Anita L. Allen
Vice Provost for Faculty, Henry R. Silverman
Professor of Law, and Professor of Philosophy,
University of Pennsylvania
"Privacy Law, Values, and Cultural Evolution"

Gwenaëlle Aubry
Researcher, Centre Jean Pépin (CNRS-Paris
Villejuif) and Associate, Centre International
d'Étude de la Philosophie Française (ENS-Paris
Rue d'Ulm)
"From Potentiality to Omnipotence:
Some Groundwork for an Archeology of Power"

Peter E. Gordon
Amabel B. James Professor of History and
Faculty Affiliate, Department of Philosophy,
Harvard University
"Metaphysics at the Moment of its Fall"

Michal Grover-Friedlander
Professor of Musicology, Tel Aviv University
"Impossible Voices of Opera"

Visiting Guest Lecturers

Susan Buck-Morss
Distinguished Professor of Political Science,
CUNY Graduate Center; Professor Emeritus,
Government Department, Cornell University
"Theological Politics"

Bonnie Honig
Nancy Duke Lewis Professor, Modern Culture and
Media, and Political Science, Brown University
"Thing Theory with Winnicott: Political Theory's
Object Relations"

For Online Application and
Program Information:
<http://sct.cornell.edu/>

Reflections on SCT 2014

My spell at the School of Criticism and Theory could not have come at a better time. I had just finished my coursework and was now hammering out a dissertation topic—paradoxes as simultaneous inhibitors to, and catalysts of, formalization efforts. Mark Hansen's seminar, "Media Between Data and Experience," was the ideal stepping-stone for me, since the course started with a paradoxical problem: how is it possible to stage a critical intervention if our usage of the media we deploy for this intervention perpetuates the order against which this intervention is directed?

The seminar grappled with the question of critical intervention by conceptualizing the manifest plane of media's experience versus their constant subcutaneous creation, processing, and circulation

of data, or by differentiating between purely operative algorithms and meaning-making hermeneutics. Our discussions encompassed topics from surface reading versus deep reading, to possibilities of tactical interventions in the media landscape from the outside versus stratagematic harnessing of systemic errors from the inside, to the distribution, scattering, and creation of agency in machinic and affective networks. Our reading list ranged from theoretical classics such as Husserl's essays on time consciousness, Guattari's *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, and Bataille's "Notion of Expenditure," to current material such as Galloway, Thacker, and Wark's *Excommunication*, the post-media anthology *Provocative Alloys*, and the first chapter of Mark Hansen's then-still unpublished book *Feed-Forward*.



Registration Picnic, A.D. White House garden

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, sctcornell-mailbox@cornell.edu.

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

Far beyond deepening our archive, steeping us in current debates, and creating an intellectual map—which we drew up on the traditional medium of the chalkboard on our last day, only to take digital photos of it and preserve them for virtual eternity as our Facebook cover photos—the stimulating discussions in Mark Hansen’s seminar embodied the leitmotif that Hent de Vries invoked for the SCT: lively theory. Theory and criticism, yes, but no “school.”

My experience at the SCT, be it in the seminar room, the public lecture hall, or in informal gatherings with my peers, stood under the aegis of lively theory. Hent de Vries’ public lecture on spiritual exercise as an active attempt at self-transformation by seeing things otherwise—by reaching for “the other side”—was one case in point of many. The colloquia transformed lively theory into living theory, as professors shared their raw work in progress with

SCT participants and faculty for open discussion and suggestions. Theory and life became fully one at our informal gatherings, potlucks, soccer matches, and trips to the Ithaca gorges, where informal conversations morphed into communions of minds.

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Perhaps the most enduring effect of the SCT arose from its most ephemeral aspect: the fortuitous encounters with others who were like-minded but diversely schooled, leading to abrupt openings in places and at times I had least expected. My extraordinary experience at the SCT could not have been what it was had it not been for the friends I made and the people I met, be it my fellow

participants, the faculty members, or the outstanding SCT staff. What had started out as a gathering of scholars grew into a society of friends.

Our debates would not have been possible had they not been predicated on the dual (paradoxical?) premise of seeking out the paradox and harnessing it as both a creative intellectual wellspring as well as an admonishing gesture toward coherence and rigor. I left the SCT inspired to write, and several of my fellow participants from Mark Hansen’s seminar said the

same. Friendships begot new ideas and vice versa. At the SCT, life and theory spun off into a mutually intensifying feedback cycle.

Tobias Kuehne
Yale University



SCT faculty and participants at social events, A.D. White House garden

Near the beginning of our six-week seminar on “Tragedy As Philosophy” at the SCT I discovered that a tragedy had occurred in Ithaca. I ventured off the campus and beyond the gorges to the downtown Commons, eager to explore the beautiful city where I was living, and saw a three-story storefront whose street-facing wall had been stripped away, like a body open on an operating table. I learned from the local community that a truck had crashed into the building one night, injuring seven and killing one. The community was clearly in shock, and the fence sheltering the damaged storefront slowly transformed into a monument of grief over my six-week residency in the city. It was a spontaneous and senseless accident that couldn’t help but provoke for me many of the questions Simon Critchley, our incorrigible seminar leader, had been asking us about tragedy in our seminar. What do the tragic dramas teach us? What purpose did they serve for the community? The senselessness of the violence in the Greek tragedies seemed to mirror the ambiguous social role of the plays themselves. We know very little about Greek life and the theatre festivals held in the City Dionysia in the fifth century BCE, and it is this “passion of unknowing,” as Jacques Derrida has called it, that activated our inquiries and discussions over the course of our seminar.

Insisting that we bring the tragic intelligences into focus, Critchley encouraged our seminar to ask what kinds of knowledge the tragedies brought to bear not only on their own time, but on ours, and how those knowledges

developed in conversation with and in resistance to the philosophical knowledges that so deeply inform institutional scholarship in the humanities. How does tragedy think? The endless lamentations issued by the tragic heroines and heroes met by no redemption or salvation stood in stark contrast to the Socratic argumentation of Plato’s dialogues that advocated for the deployment of wonder in the pursuit of truth and goodness. What is the value of thought, we asked, that comes to no redemptive conclusion about the nature of life or of the world and that does not culminate in meaning? Can art, and specifically tragic drama, be something other than the manifestation of a philosophical truth? It was these inquiries—about the desire for meaning and the boundaries of thought—that resonated so sharply with the intentions of the SCT program that Director Hent de Vries presented to us on our very first day. SCT, he suggested, encourages non-dogmatic explorations of criticism and theory that, first and foremost, ask what criticism and theory are and what they can become. At the SCT, theory became a question rather than an explanation. As such, the questions we were asking in our seminar opened out into *the* question of SCT in a busy harmony: what is tragedy for and what does it do, and how is this one way of asking what theory does and can do?

As we moved into the common era with the writings of Nietzsche, Hegel, Hölderlin, and Benjamin, it became clear just how closely our basic conceptions of literature are informed by Greek drama and just how central it was for the continental thinkers as a model of

alterity around which to build modern theory. But as we moved from *Hecuba* to *Hamlet*, Critchley inspired us to view the Greeks not as distant others against which we contrast our modern selves but as beings whose lives, especially in their lurid tragic characterizations, are remarkably familiar. The tragedies foregrounded beings marked by partial or suspended agency as they negotiated life amid times of war and divine chaos; they wanted not truth but justice, and through them I felt that what we were studying was highly contemporary. Our task as students of ancient tragedy was not an anthropological recovery of a world past, but an appropriation of those undead intelligences with our own interests and struggles. This capacity to invoke the tragic as a kind of knowledge that compels the current political, social, and intellectual imagination is what made the SCT such an enriching and wide-ranging experience. The tragic heroines and choruses that bleated strophes of partial decisions, frozen agency, and confused perceptions were echoed in the figure of the “botched self” featured by Leela Ghandi in her lecture on “Moral Imperfection.” As thinkers that, like the Greeks, are living lives in a world that feels perennially chaotic and violent, it is our job to exercise theory non-masterfully, so that theory remains open as a critique of power and total force; it is the imperfect person who has room within her to take others in in the mode of thinking and reading or grieving those lost to the tragedies in the Commons.

Roshaya Rodness
McMaster University



Participants on a tour of Finger Lakes wineries

The beginning of the 2014 session of the School of Criticism and Theory coincided with the publication by Duke University Press of *Theory Aside*. I grabbed a copy at Cornell's Olin Library, thinking it might supply some valuable insight throughout my sojourn in Theoryland.

The collection begins with a trenchant yet familiar diagnosis: its editors, Jason Potts and Daniel Stout, have wearied of the fad-heavy, messianic logic that governs contemporary theoretical scholarship. Theory, they say, too often disregards interesting avenues for investigation as it looks for the "next big thing"—whoever or whatever will answer all our questions and save us from our previous theoretical sins. Conjuring up the wisdom of the teen comedy *Mean Girls*, our seminar leader, Sianne Ngai, once observed a compulsion in the rhetoric of innovation to consistently "try to make *fetch* happen." In the comedy in question, one character tries to promote the term *fetch* as a modish synonym for *cool*. "It's not going to happen," the leader of her group retorts.

Whether or not *fetch* happens, or whether or not we successfully turn a concept or an idea into an event, we might in the process turn a blind eye to provocative details and approaches. Potts and Stout's suggestion, as the title of their book suggests, is to look for what has been left behind and cast aside. Exit the cult of newness. Exit uncritical imperatives of progress. Exit—and this echoes SCT director Hent de Vries' comments on curiosity and openness at the inaugural reception—dogmatic paradigms.

Theory Aside opens with a reference to Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge's 2011 *Theory After 'Theory'* (itself somewhat of a response to Terry Eagleton's 2003 *After Theory*). In the passage at stake, Potts and Stout align themselves with Elliott and Attridge's critique of a tendency in theory "to draw obsessively on the work of certain oracular figures." The discomfort at the root of *Theory Aside*, then, relates, on the one hand, to the narrowness of the theoretical canon, and, on the other, to the idea that this canon is given the undisputed authority to prophesize about the future of the field or discipline.

Ironically, perhaps, the scholars through whom *Theory Aside* aims to reorient theoretical scholarship (e.g. Erving Goffman, Alfred North Whitehead) barely register as marginal today. But the book



SCT Director Hent de Vries (center) with participants, A.D. White House garden

remains effective, especially when it allows itself to be literal. The book works best, that is, when it tells its readers to look at an object, then look aside, and then rethink the way they viewed this object in the first place.

So, what will we see if we put aside or look beside theory at SCT?

Theory aside: criticism

Why are we less inclined to speak of criticism than we are to speak of theory? Is it because of the invitation to judgment that criticism connotes?

Refreshingly, the School of Criticism and Theory maintains a productive tension between *criticism* and *theory*—not only in its name, but also in the practices it fosters. Over the course of our seminar, Sianne Ngai repeatedly encouraged us to think as critics by paying attention to the style and form of the academic pieces we were reading. How does this text work? What gestures, what moves enable an author to jump from one point to the next? What is the value, for instance, of prioritizing the term *antinomy* over *contradiction*? Are we convinced by this strategy?

Ngai, via an ever-skillful reading of Kant, emphasized the social valence of judgments. Aesthetic judgments, she postulated, are subjective but universally valid expressions of an impulse to share an experience. By making aesthetic judgments, by doing criticism, we put ourselves in danger. We exposed ourselves as much as we did the texts we were reading. We tested ideas and helped each other work through them. Annelise Riles came up with just the perfect phrase for that practice during the session's closing panel: feminist collaboration.

Theory aside: gorges

In the first week of the program, Hent mentioned Jacques Derrida's "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils." In this essay, Derrida writes about the dramatic tenure of the Cornell University campus. More specifically, he says that the gorges that delineate the site summon something like an experience of the sublime: a suspension between life and death, or the conjunction of infinity and finitude.

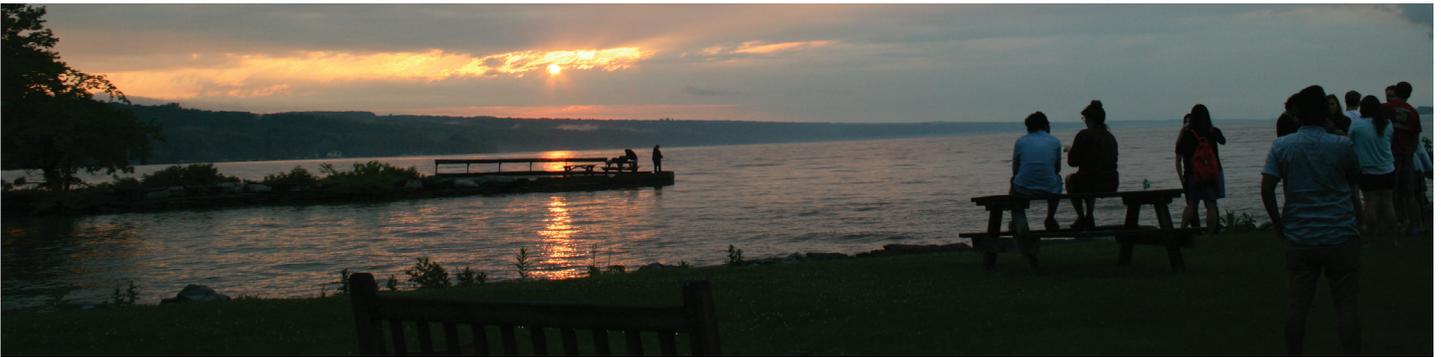
Here's a fact which, cliché or not, deserves to be reiterated: Ithaca's natural wonders and iconic topography contribute a great deal to the success of SCT. By putting theory aside, even momentarily, we discovered the bounty surrounding us. Treman Park and Buttermilk Falls provided incomparable opportunities for swimming and hiking.

If this sounds like a tourism ad, it's because many of us had by the sixth week become fierce advocates of Ithaca. (Oh, have I mentioned the jaw-dropping sunsets? And the lakeside farmers market? Or the joy of reading by the waterfalls? The tempo of water falling healthily impacts reading habits, you know.)

Theory aside: more theory

The lecture-seminar-lecture-reception-mini-seminar-seminar-colloquium-with-a-few-office-hour-meetings-here-and-there schedule speaks for itself: SCT offers an immersive capacity, swarming with intellectual and social interactions. SCT is intense and intensive, in as much as beside theory, we can always be assured to find... more theory.

Jean-Thomas Tremblay
University of Chicago



Picnic at Taughannock Falls State Park

When I visited the Cornell Store to buy textbooks for my seminar, “Theorizing the Gift: Law, Markets, Love,” I was amazed at the size of the two clothing departments in the store. The books, even put together with the academic paraphernalia, covered just a small space in comparison to the area devoted to T-shirts, jackets, pants, and what not imprinted with different types of Cornell logos. As that did not concern me, I just bought the books and walked away to catch my first seminar meeting.

Six weeks later, on the last day of my stay in Ithaca, I was again at Cornell Store. I was not looking for edifying literature but eagerly going through the sweatshirts and jumpers: I simply had to get myself a Cornell jacket – and a key ring. I just couldn’t leave without giving myself something that would remind me of the School of Criticism and Theory, the great mind-blowing and life-changing experience. Back at home, I’m rude enough to wrap myself in the Cornell colors even when I go to my office at University of Helsinki.

Studying the gift under the wise and warm supervision of Professor Annelise Riles was an amazing combination of loads of challenging theoretical reading and exchanging and developing insights

in intensive seminar discussions. Giving and receiving gifts are parts of our everyday experience. The socially controlled reciprocity and the invisible but important nuances of proper gift giving and receiving form an integral element in particular cultural practices. Theorizing the gift showed the depth and difficulty of things I thought I already knew. The fact that we tried but never really got to speak about gift as love and love as gift gives a hint of the dangerous and challenging sides of our theme.

Another perspective opened in our work: Academic studies detach us from the personal and individual level and provide methods and approaches to reach generalizable concepts and levels of universalizability. Under the detachment there are our personal lives. Sometimes hidden and secret, sometimes in thriving interaction with the academic approaches, sometimes taking over and making one’s life the main material and driving force of one’s research and writing. It goes the other way, too, and one becomes what one works with. Being an academic, then, is not just your life and work but makes your destiny. Sharing such things with each other is only possible in the kind of respectful and trusting atmosphere that was an essential part of the Gift seminar.

I spent a lot of time reading, attending seminars, colloquia, and lectures as well

as doing research in the library. There was time for other things, too. The life at the dorm, Cascadilla Hall, seemed to me like a participatory field study on how to manage proximity and distance in a social setting where you have to share the most intimate spaces with your peers before it turned into a wonderful community of fellow participants. I also took advantage of Cornell’s group fitness classes. Hydro training, TRX circuit, and pilates displayed parts of the Campus I would have otherwise missed and gave me the opportunity to meet people outside the SCT. The down- and uphill walks that visits to downtown Ithaca involved were also a great change for the motionless hours of study. The A.D. White House receptions were always one of the peak elements of the week.

During the last week I often noticed having tears in my eyes. I just felt like crying. Was it exhaustion? The shared intensity of everything was consuming but that was not the cause of my weeping. Receiving a pure gift is an experience that fills the gifted with silent joy and deep gratitude and evokes a wish to join the circle of reciprocity in which gifts cannot be paid back but must be delivered further.

Jaana Hallamaa
University of Helsinki

When asked about the time that I spent at the School of Criticism and Theory, my response has been resounding: SCT was wild. It was phenomenal. It was furious, intimate, and incredibly inspiring. It was, as Hent de Vries promised, an unreserved occasion to celebrate “the life of the mind, the force of the better argument, and the courage of imagination.”

Set against the bucolic undulations and gorges of central New York, this year’s session brought 92 participants and nearly a dozen elite faculty members together, to participate in six weeks of rigorous intellectual exchange. While in attendance, we read, and sparred, and learned from one another. More than simply an opportunity to demonstrate philosophical aptitude, we gathered as denizens of the undercommons to combat selective blindness, debate an ethics of democracy, and scheme about the eco-political imaginaries in our midst. Whether in the classroom, at the colloquia, or during one of many social occasions, there was never a shortage of lively and intellectually humbling conversation. The erudite rigor and diverse research interests possessed by the participants and faculty mentors elevated the caliber of exchange and fostered an environment of creative engagement.

As in years gone by, this year boasted a sensational roster of faculty members. Simon Critchley, Mark B. N. Hansen, Sianne Ngai, and Annelise Riles graced our classrooms and proved exceptionally generous in time and spirit. In addition to delivering the core seminars, each faculty member also presented an exciting public lecture and hosted a colloquium, based on current works in progress. These were of great value; not only did they provide us with advance knowledge of our mentors’

forthcoming work but also granted us insight into their scholarly processes.

Having drawn extensively upon his work throughout much of my graduate career, I was thrilled to have an opportunity to join Mark B. N. Hansen’s seminar, “Media Between Data and Experience.” Our seminar took on the contemporary media situation. Despite their continued reliance on haptic and sensorial input, 21st century media technologies are increasingly taking place outside of the phenomenal field of human activity. While this marks a significant form of phenomenological closure, it has also initiated new modes of technological affordance, exposing pressing areas of inquiry for contemporary media theory.

Our seminar started with a call to action, a heretical demand for excommunication. Working through a remarkably well-tailored collection of recent and canonical texts, we became inquisitive translators, mapping critical connections between the experiential instantiation of media and processual data that undergird it. We talked of wild boys, creaking doors, effusive spam, and the enduring ephemeral. In an effort to counter the obfuscating transparency of “seamless” media technologies, we located instances of opaque slippage and debated the tactical viability of “being evil.”

Heightening the stakes of the conversation, we learned that the submedial terrain of 21st century media has not only outgrown the phenomenological restraints of affective software and post-human prostheses, but that its ubiquitous and quickening expansion is also short-circuiting familiar experiences of attention, memory, and imagination. The temporal disjuncture, rise of cognitive capitalism, and depletion of general intellect associated with contemporary media has led

Franco “Bifo” Berardi to characterize our current age as one marked by the impoverishment of experience, sensuality, and meaning.

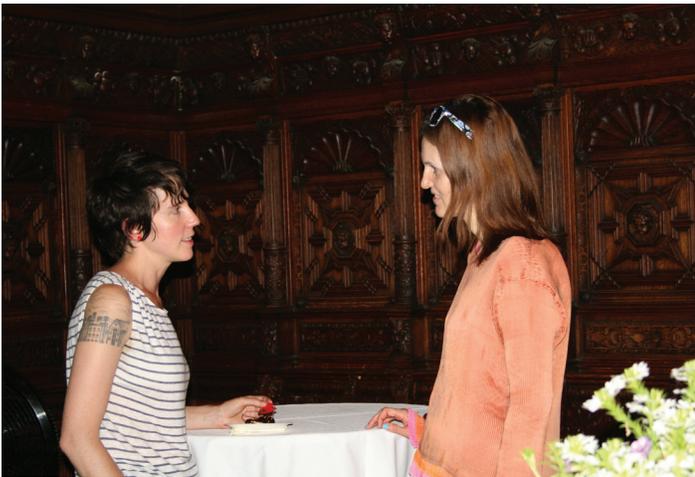
While it was hard at times not to respond to our seminar discussions and readings by disconnecting from the internet and chucking all electronics out the window, our seminar smartly side-stepped the utopian nostalgia associated with longing for a time before (or without) social media and the economy of “likes” that now fuels it. Instead, the latter portion of our session engaged with new and emerging formulations of media theory, particularly those affiliated with algorithmic futurity and medial speculation. Of particular excitement in this case, was our engagement with and analysis of Hansen’s most recent (and forthcoming) work. As participants we were enthralled with his “fetching” and rigorous account of Whitehead, and invigorated by his speculative analysis of media futures in the present. It was a great privilege to sit in on these classes, and receive instruction from a true leader in the field of media studies.

In the months that have followed the School of Criticism and Theory, the ideas and relationships that I developed during my attendance have thoroughly permeated my work, generating new insight and exciting opportunities for future collaboration. I left SCT feeling energized and eager to resume writing my dissertation. I left SCT with notebooks filled, pages underlined, and as part of a vibrant intellectual community full of exciting and interesting academics. SCT was great. In fact, it was better than great.

Ashley Scarlett
University of Toronto



Closing Faculty Panel



SCT faculty with participants at social events (clockwise from top left): Mark B. N. Hansen (right); Sianne Ngai (left); Simon Critchley (right); Annelise Riles (right)

On the very last day of this summer's SCT program, all four of the six-week faculty sat at the front of the small lecture hall, along with Director Hent de Vries, former Director Amanda Anderson, and mini-seminar faculty Leela Gandhi to engage in a final discussion to round off our six-week intellectual odyssey. I'm sure the faculty felt much the same as we the participants did that day—exhausted, first of all, because six weeks is a long time to sustain the kind of intense intellectual community SCT creates, and maybe a little anxious to run home and change for the final banquet that would start just a few hours after the panel ended, but also, perhaps most of all, reluctant to call an end to this program and disband this community that had formed in this very hall with this group of people over these six endlessly full too-short weeks. In any case, it was at this final panel that Simon Critchley, in whose

seminar "Tragedy As Philosophy" I had belonged, dared to try to summarize the path our seminar had wound in just a few words. Those words were *generality*, *particularity*, *singularity*, and *exemplarity*. Our seminar had ranged from the ancient Greeks to the German Romantic lineage of Schelling and Hegel on to Heidegger and Benjamin in the twentieth century. Each thinker we studied, Critchley said, possessed a singular voice—one both unique and particular but exemplary as well, a model to ventriloquize in the process of forging one's own singular voice.

The subject of our seminar was philosophy's engagements with Greek tragedy, and especially how, beginning with Plato, philosophy "excludes a range of experiences and affects that we call tragic." In essence, philosophers have consistently made tragedy exemplary without regarding the particularity of the peculiar phenomenon of 5th-century

Athenian tragic poetry. In Hegel's influential reading, wrestled with in the twentieth century by thinkers like Szondi, Lacan, and Butler, tragedy iterates the collapse or sublimation of equal but opposed ethical demands. An alternative view, offered by the classicist Nicole Loraux, is that tragedy "emphasizes incompatibilities... only in order both to exalt and deny them in the condensed form of an oxymoron." Tragedy does not enact the overcoming of antitheses but precisely their irresolution, expressible in rage and lamentation. As Critchley would say, tragedy—especially Euripides—illustrates the ethical insufficiency of the individual, what Critchley has elsewhere called an ethics of hetero-affectivity.

Theorizing Greek tragedy has always itself been a site of tension and ambiguity. We come to the texts, whether in the audience of a repertory theater or around the table in the seminar room, already, as it were, contaminated by



SCT Public Lectures (clockwise from top left): Amanda Anderson; Michael W. Jennings; Tricia Rose; Christopher Newfield; Ursula K. Heise; Leela Gandhi

theory—by definitions of “the tragic,” by competing claims of the text in front of us as a *text* or as the incomplete record of a performance, a performance to be put on at a particular moment before a particular audience. These tensions are present already in the *Poetics* of Aristotle, for whom tragic plots ought to be as effective when read or paraphrased as when performed, and who inaugurated the interminable debate over the affective dimension of tragedy with the famous and famously obscure discussion of tragic *catharsis*.

As a classicist with a comparative literature background who is currently in the middle of a dissertation about Aeschylean tragedy, the chance to explore these topics in the setting of the School of Criticism and Theory was too good to be true. I knew going in that Critchley’s seminar would be valuable. But beyond even what I could have anticipated, I was repeatedly surprised with how

productive I found the parts of the program that were not directly relevant to my own research. My notes for Sianne Ngai’s public lecture on literary gimmicks and Hent de Vries’ on spiritual exercises that introduced me to the work of Pierre Hadot are a mess of circles and arrows around quotations and references with an emphatic “use this!” scrawled next to them. And this is all before accounting for the ways Christopher Newfield’s mini-seminar on the post-capitalist university, Ursula Heise’s on new urban ecocriticism, Tricia Rose’s on the politics of colorblindness, and Leela Gandhi’s on Pessoa and global ethics were enriching contributions to my worldliness both inside and outside of academia.

It feels like yielding to the obvious to describe this summer at SCT as a *singular* experience, yet that’s the way it adds up. As befits a program housed at Cornell, surrounded by the gorges of Ithaca, there is simply nowhere else like it.

Everyone from the faculty to each of my fellow participants brought a particular perspective and particular voice from different disciplines and research areas and critical loyalties, and each was also an example to follow of how to be engaged in theory today.

I’m glad to have met every single one of the SCT participants and to have shared not only our seminars, lectures, colloquia, and receptions, but the World Cup games at the Chapter House, the *Agamemnon* reading group sessions, the rainy picnic at Taughannock Park, the weekends swimming at Buttermilk Falls, and the dead-serious conversations about the Heideggerian behavior of rogue penguins.

Kevin Batton
University of California, Irvine

Of Ithaca's many cascade-lined trails, my favorite was the gorge trail at Buttermilk Falls State Park, which I visited twice. The first time was with a large group who, having completed only one week of "theory camp," were still learning each other's names. We started at the upper end, stopping beside the first small waterfall and idyllic pool. One after another, SCTers climbed over stones and dropped into the frigid water. As it turned out, we didn't see Buttermilk Falls proper that day; nor did we notice we had missed it. We were busy talking—and at SCT, talk is a wonderfully serious, absorbing sort of business. That day, shivering in the water, we were building the language (and the social cues and trust) we would need for five more weeks of intense, layered, often surprising conversations about everything under the sun—affect theory, the gorges, the future of Marxism, deep time, the World Cup, and more. As SCT progressed, we continued to explore

Ithaca's striking environments in small and large groups, revisiting discussions begun in seminar and broaching new ones.

Before SCT, I thought "theory people" spoke a sort of code: fast-trending neologisms, unpronounceable names, and nouns that used to be adjectives (see, e.g., my seminar on "The Contemporary"). I thought of myself as someone able to get by in theory-speak when necessary, but usually eager to return to a more familiar analytic vocabulary that I (rather provincially) thought closer to plain English. Some days at SCT, my theory-speak thesis seemed correct. Mark Hansen's public lecture on futurity and prediction, which introduced me to the "superject," was neither the first nor last time I made use of Google during SCT events.

Over the course of the program, though, I stopped thinking of theory-speak as code, and started to understand it instead as

encounter—as the convergence of time, space, ideas, and personalities. Across seminar sessions, in post-lecture Q&As, and at social gatherings, I imagined (forgive the metaphor) an intellectual dog park where dog—er, theory—people brought their delightfully varied, often strange vocabularies to mingle . . . perhaps to befriend, perhaps to bark at, one another. This image came to mind the first week when I heard four different, and confident, pronunciations of "Agamben." It returned when my seminar read our seminar leader Sianne Ngai's fascinating chapter on the "zany"; journeying through philosophy and cultural history together, we wondered if we had ever known the word. And then there was the day the seminar spent two hours distinguishing "socially necessary labor time" from "the social labor hour" in an article by Moise Postone—with the satisfying result that we all understood Postone better and, Ngai joked, felt like we had been to the gym.



Final Banquet, Willard Straight Hall

Reframing theory as a kind of intellectual encounter was growthful and liberating. I moved past the impulse to translate into familiar terms others' theoretical insights. I started to linger in confusion and ambiguity, and to relish most the moments when I had no word for a concept but another person offered one. Realizing we all came to SCT with experiences that mattered, and things still to learn, I also grew more confident that my ideas, expressed my way, would enrich others' intellectual lives as theirs enriched mine. I still bear in mind Amanda Anderson's observation, during a faculty panel on the final day, that the seminar is a form of scholarship unique to the humanities—a carefully staged, yet richly generative and unpredictable, encounter.

My research and political commitments center on questions of race and

gender, which are omitted from or underdeveloped in many theoretical discourses. At SCT, my interventions met vocal support and engagement.

“Realizing we all came to SCT with experiences that mattered, and things still to learn, I also grew more confident that my ideas, expressed my way, would enrich others' intellectual lives as theirs enriched mine.”

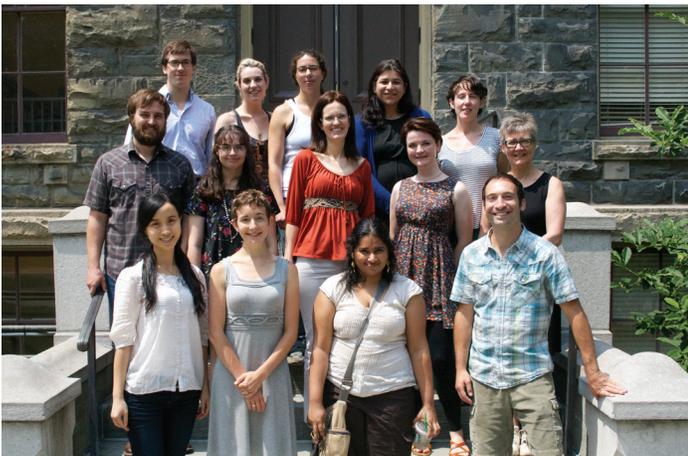
And although being a woman of color anywhere in academia, including at SCT, can require additional grit and labor, SCT's faculty and visiting lecturers included an astounding, diverse lineup of female theorists—more than I had met up to that point in my graduate education. In the program's final weeks, a few participants convened a small but vibrant black-studies reading group; since SCT ended, we have continued our

work together via a long-distance writing group. While it took some effort to find my place as a critical-race and feminist scholar at SCT, I did find it, and the process was extraordinarily rewarding.

Late in the summer, I returned to Buttermilk Falls with one SCT colleague, an architect who turned out also to be a filmmaker. It was a different trip from the first. Starting at the lower end, we walked

the entire gorge trail, awed by what he called “the slow reveal.” The unassuming path offered almost magical vistas—so many waterfalls!—around each bend. It was an apt ending to a summer that, I suspect, will continue to reveal itself as transformational in years ahead.

Mai-Linh Hong
University of Virginia



Six-week seminar leaders (clockwise from top left) with participants: Annelise Riles; Simon Critchley; Sianne Ngai; Mark B. N. Hansen



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SCT faculty and participants at Taughannock Falls State Park