English
AT CORNELL
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Thinking Across Cultures

An Interview with Satya Mohanty

According to the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, all of us—partly because of what's called "globalization" and partly because so many societies are becoming more multicultural—will have to develop the skills to understand cultures that are very different from the ones in which we grew up. By the same token, cultures will have to learn from one another. If we lack these skills we are not ready for the twenty-first century. One way to develop them is to think comparatively across cultures, and to analyze similarities and differences.

The challenge of these global realities to the study of literature is therefore clear. After decades of unexamined ethnocentrism, followed by a period of intense self-critique, students of literature are starting to think about what genuine comparative cross-cultural analysis looks like. English departments of the future will contain specialists in Native American culture, the African diaspora, and the various linguistic traditions of the Caribbean; they will cover Anglophone literatures from Nigeria to Australia to India as well as the non-English "nations" within those imperial spaces, whether in the native populations of North America or the linguistic "sub" regions of India. The picture this presents obviously challenges the traditional limitations of English (and European) studies by including within discussions of a Western or specifically national tradition the voices of the marginalized, stateless, dominated, and conquered, as well as the voices of the unfamiliar and the "other." By exploring the possibility of intercultural understanding, literary studies are not simply responding passively to global pressures but can help to build the human future—in essence, by conducting a conversation between the children of former imperialists and the children of former subjects about their shared, conflictual pasts.

The lead essays in this issue of English at Cornell—an interview with Satya Mohanty and an essay by Dag Woubshet—explore the potential for genuine cross-cultural analysis and the complexity of multicultural identity. The English department's cultural richness also appears in the briefer features, on new faculty and on new books.

Satya Mohanty came to Cornell twenty-five years ago with degrees from the University of Delhi and the University of Illinois. His book *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (1997), along with a series of seminal articles on literature and culture, established his reputation as a leading exponent of a realist theory of identity and multiculturalism. He is also one of the founders of The Future of Minority Studies Project, an international consortium of scholars who meet and publish regularly on topics related to literature, identity, and social justice (www.fmsproject.cornell.edu). In 2006 he co-translated Fakir Mohan Senapati's novel *Six Acres and a Third*, which brought to English-speaking audiences one of the most brilliant works of nineteenth-century Indian literature. The conference "Alternative Modernities and the Literary View from Below," which he organized this spring at Cornell, demonstrates his continued commitment to work in cross-cultural comparatism. In the following interview, he and Paul Sawyer talk about the challenges and implications of the present moment in literary and cultural studies.

Paul Sawyer: You have defended the validity of doing cross-cultural comparisons between the West and the formerly colonized world. But prominent cultural critics—the late Edward Said is perhaps the best-known—have demonstrated in detail the ways Europeans have viewed and constructed the "Orient" through their own lens, a lens that has distorted and undervalued non-Western cultures. Aren't there inevitable problems when Western scholars try to analyze works from non-Western cultures?

Satya Mohanty: Said is no doubt right—Europeans have indeed viewed non-Europeans through flawed and distorting lenses, especially in the modern imperial age. But that phenomenon is not limited to the West's perception of the non-West. Look at the history of sexist and patriarchal thought, and you will see pretty much the same kind of deep-seated prejudice or ideology. What follows from that, I think, is that we should look carefully at *why* such distortions arose—at their sources and their causes. Only then can we ask how to minimize the distorting effects of such lenses, such tacit ideologies and theories.

Q: For some people, cultural relativism is the answer because it refuses to condemn values that are different or unfamiliar. But you've rejected cultural relativism as a viable position. Why?

A: Here is how I define cultural relativism: according to a cultural relativist, texts and ideas must be understood and evaluated *only* in their cultural context. I think there's a real problem with that view. I started to realize in the mid-1980s that relativism was a major issue in literary theory. Some well-known claims made by post-structuralist thinkers amounted to a kind of extreme relativism—consider, for example, Jean-Francois Lyotard's thesis that you can never judge or even understand what he calls a "traditional" culture using the terms of a "modern" or "scientific" culture, since (as he claims) there is no meta-language

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available to make such a judgment. The cultures are like two different "language games." That might sound like a form of respect, and yes, it does prevent "us" from making crude ethnocentric judgments about "them." But if you follow that logic, there's absolutely nothing that "they" will ever have to teach "us"; we can never learn anything from them because "their" world is radically different from "ours." So for example, let's say their society offers a better model of child-rearing or health-care than what we have in ours, or a better way to educate the young through the use of the arts. If this form of relativism is to be believed, my culture is so fundamentally different from theirs that I can never learn anything from them. Relativism ends up being very limiting.

What I argued in essays I wrote in the late 1980s and early 1990s is that we need to fight against both ethnocentrism and relativism. All complex understanding is achieved across differences. That's what we see in our daily lives, even within our own cultures; that's what we do, for instance, in our classrooms, when we analyze a poem and a student says, "I don't think that's what that means." Instead of saying "No, you're wrong, here's what it means, " you say, "Hmmm, tell me why you say that" and you realize that the question may get you to see something you hadn't seen before. In fact you sometimes revise your original reading of the poem—and that's because of the valuable process of give and take.

So my point is that we engage in dialogue and conversation in the natural course of things, that they are not unusual, highly specialized forms of communication or interaction. Cross-cultural comparison is an extension of everyday conversation, although it is sometimes much more difficult because of the differences in cultural self-conception, in underlying assumptions that are often ethical and even metaphysical.

Q: One assumption of the Eurocentric interpretation of cultures is the view that modernity, which now presumably includes everyone, is a Western invention, like the telephone and the computer—something the West has transmitted to the rest of the world. What are the problems with that view?

A: Instead of making broad generalizations about concepts like modernity, I think we need to come up with a more focused definition of it, isolating the kinds of ideas that are crucial to what we value about our lives right now, in the modern age. We really need to find out if there are non-colonialist, non-capitalist forms of those ideas. One such notion, I think, is what is called individuality: that you're an individual, not simply a cog in a machine, in a larger whole to which you're completely subservient. The notion of the individual—that's a horribly tainted Western idea, isn't it? But why would we think that, say, Indian, Chinese, or Native American cultures didn't value the notion of healthy individuality? It's a myth that they didn't; in fact, if you go to the cultural practices and texts, you see rich notions of individuality in all kinds of cultures. Here is another word that's abused a lot: "rationality." The notion of rationality doesn't appear in the same form in all cultures, but then the rationality you encounter in Aristotle's ethics is also very different from the notion of reason in Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which is instrumental—merely a means to achieve a specific end. So why should rationality always be the same thing in every culture?

Q: Where in the non-Western world can we trace the emergence of ideas like individuality and rationality?

A: Let me give just one example. There's a number of Indian historians and literary scholars who have been thinking about the centuries immediately preceding the colonial period in India, the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, in particular. They are revising the traditional position, one held also by some Indian scholars under the influence of British historians like James Mill, that had assumed that the pre-colonial period constituted the Dark Ages, and that to see the vibrancy of Indian culture we need to go back to the ancient period. These recent scholars are saying, through careful analyses of texts (especially in Telugu and Tamil), and of social practices and social movements, that that's simply a distorted view of Indian history. A "traditional" modernity that values individual initiative and rational critique can be found in many aspects of pre-colonial Indian culture. Now, I think that's the beginning of a very exciting project, one that's much less vague than those general slogans denouncing all forms of modernity as inherently colonialist.

Q: You're working on a text called the Lakshmi Purana, written in the sixteenth century in Orissa, the part of India that you come from. Tell us what you find surprisingly "modern" about this sixteenth-century text.

A: It's a perfect example of a text from late medieval India that is startlingly modern in many ways. I hadn't read the *Lakshmi Purana* until very recently, but I had heard the story from my mother when I was ten or eleven. "Purana" means old or ancient—it's a genre that gives the narrative a certain pedigree—and it's also religious with goddesses and gods, description of ritual worship, and so on. But this purana does some very unusual things. First, it's not written in Sanskrit but in Oriya, the vernacular language of Orissa [a province in eastern India], during the period when cultural vernacularization is going on all over India. And what's happening around this time is that they are consciously trying to write in the local languages, to develop those languages and literatures, but primarily to reach ordinary people who didn't know Sanskrit.

Balaram Das, the author, was part of a group of Oriya writers called the panchasakha ("five friends") who are mystic saint-poets with profoundly radical social perspectives. And what he does is fascinating. He takes the goddess Lakshmi—who's an ancient Vedic deity, and who is also part of the temple complex of Puri—and turns her into an explicitly feminist protagonist. She is beautiful and gracious as a hostess and as a wife, but only up to a point. When her deepest values—caste and gender egalitarianism—are challenged by her husband Jagannath and his older brother, she says "Enough is enough." She leaves her husband and the Puri temple. Now, the reason she becomes angry is that the patriarchs objected to something that the goddess has always done as a matter of principle, something that defines her core

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identity: she regularly goes out of the sacred temple complex and mingles with ordinary people of all castes, teaching them, serving them, feeding them. And when the gods object to this and Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and fortune, leaves them, they are in big trouble: they can't get food to eat, they go begging, they're basically humiliated. The gods finally show up at Lakshmi's house and plead with her to return to the temple. She agrees to come back but on one condition: in the temple, the holiest of all places, she demands, there will be no caste barriers. Chandalas and Brahmins will eat together, take food from one another's hands. Her husband Lord Jagannath (translation: Lord of the Universe) agrees, and the goddess returns.

Now you might say, "This is a wonderfully utopian vision." But this is no utopia; there's in fact a custom in Puri—one of the four holiest places for Hindus—that seems to go back to this text. Within the temple, the lowest and the highest castes eat together, with no discrimination or segregation. Actually, I think it's extremely likely that the custom goes back much farther that Balaram Das's time, and his purana was most probably written in support of it when it was under attack by the Brahminical elite. The egalitarian practice must have been instituted because of the struggles of lower caste and outcaste devotees, and this text was written to support these struggles, creating an origin myth, providing the Lord's sanction for this heterodox custom.

One of the fascinating things about the *Lakshmi Purana* is that it's not just a book you read in the library, it's woven into the rhythm of Orissan social life. It is a holy purana, and every harvest season—by decree of Lord Jagannath himself—women in every Hindu household in every village read it, and talk about it, explain it, discuss its significance. Think about this for a second: a feminist, anti-caste text which by the Lord's decree is now read by women in every household and discussed—not just recited but discussed—which means this purana has succeeded in creating a new social and political space. There are fairly "modern" conceptions of selfhood in this text, grounded in radically egalitarian values.

Q: Let's go back for a moment to cultural relativism. You reject the claim that, as you phrased it, a person cannot judge or even understand a traditional culture using the terms of another, more "modern" culture since there is no meta-language available to make such a judgment. So what do you think are the grounds for making cross-cultural judgments, as you've been doing?

A: I started to see in the mid-1980s that relativism was a tempting but problematic thesis in contemporary literary theory, and it was especially attractive to scholars when it wasn't openly acknowledged as a thesis. You could see relativism everywhere, while very few people claimed to be relativists. Slogans about radical "discontinuity" were very popular (I'm thinking of the early Foucault), as were Lyotard's Wittgensteinian formulations about language games. I couldn't find adequate analyses of relativism in the general field of literary criticism, and so in the late 1980s I started looking outside our field. I found a much deeper discussion of these issues in the philosophy of science. In the 1970s, a decade before I started working on this question, philosophers and historians of science had analyzed these issues—in the debate over Thomas Kuhn's work—and they had discussed it very productively. And that's when I started realizing that we in literary theory may be digging a little hole for ourselves by not looking at our own questions as they have been formulated in other fields.

What I got from these debates is relevant to what you and I have been talking about: cross-cultural comparison. Putnam and Boyd, among others, argued that there is a conception of objectivity across various cultures and among scientists that can't be criticized as easily as positivist notions of objectivity are *[see sidebar]*. Positivism held that facts are just "there," like a table or stone. To find out if the table is really, objectively, there, I just kick it—as we all know. But there are so many things you can't kick, and things are real and objective in so many different ways. The crucial post-positivist thesis is that everything—perception, knowledge, even scientific observation—is mediated, by biases and presuppositions, by ideologies and theories *[see sidebar]*. Sometimes these mediations cause profound distortions that will make me see things I'm not actually seeing. But—the philosophical realist will argue—there's also room for the correction of distorted views, and we need to analyze the epistemic role played by our mediating prejudices or theories. If everything is unavoidably mediated, relativism is one option—since we may not be able to get out of our own culture's prejudices and underlying assumptions. The other option is the postpositivist realist one, which is that we take the mediating layers very seriously, seriously enough to discern what they're enabling us to see and what they're distorting or obscuring—and in each case we ask the crucial questions: How? Why? I think some notion of objectivity, one that includes a complex account of how distortions arise, is essential for cross-cultural comparison.

Q: Our assumptions and biases are related to our perspectives on the world, and one word for a particular perspective on the world is identity. Taking identity seriously is a goal you've pursued for a good part of your professional career, both in your own work and in the colloquia and publications of the Future of Minority Studies (FMS) research group, where you've helped develop a realist position on identity. But for some people today, "identity" and its linked phrase "identity politics" connote only a new form of tribalism at odds with the very form of cross-cultural understanding and coming-together that you appear to endorse in your other work. Why do you insist on the importance of identity, particularly "minority" identity?

A: My view is that we need to take identity seriously enough to find out more about it as a complex social phenomenon. The positive transformation of identities has been the basis of some of the most exciting developments in our times: Black liberation struggles, the LGBT movements, third-world decolonization, and so forth. None of these movements grew automatically out of what people look like or even what they feel; they were based on the building of connections among people, on marking similarities and differences in their daily experiences and social interests, on what some social scientists call "brokerage." Identity-based politics grows out of an analysis of the whole social system, an analysis that contains theoretical explanations and rational conjectures about groups of people and their identities. So I think we should be wary of collapsing all forms of identity, good and bad, into one undifferentiated concept—and that's the main thing FMS scholars have been talking about. Instead of fleeing from notions of identity, I would argue, we need to look carefully enough to be able to see whether what a group of people believes about its identity is justified—in terms of their overall values and the way the social world is in fact constituted.

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Philosophical terms in this interview

Cultural relativism: (1) the view that texts and ideas from a particular culture can be understood and evaluated only within the terms of that culture, never from outside it, which implies that different cultures are incommensurable in relation to each other; (2) the view that no meta-language exists that can mediate between the values and practices of different cultures.

Positivism: the view that the world consists of, and is directly knowable as, a set of facts (for example, the hardness of a particular stone or the number of my fingers).

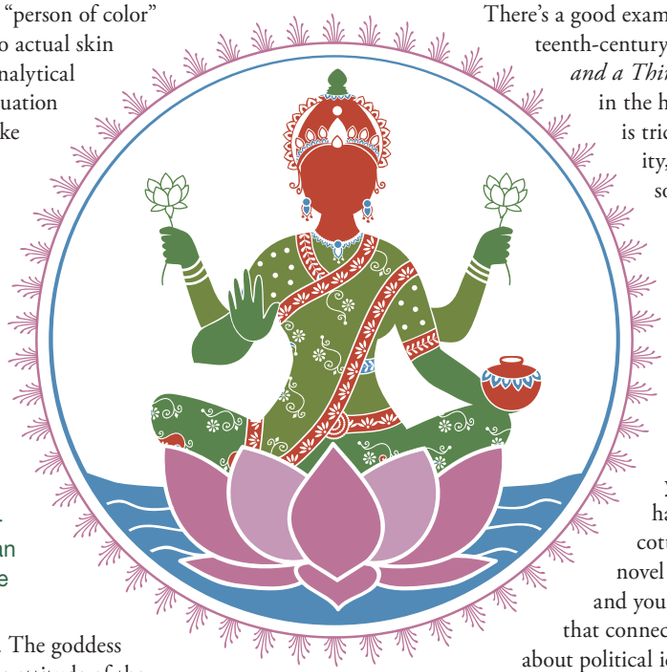
Moral Realism: the position that moral values and beliefs can have objective validity and are in theory universalizable (as opposed to moral relativism, which denies any universalizable grounds for deciding among different beliefs).

Post-positivist realism: the view, held by Hilary Putnam, Richard Boyd, and some other philosophers, that (unlike the positivist view) our knowledge of the world is never direct but is inevitably mediated by our interpretations, and that (unlike the relativist view) we can have valid grounds for our beliefs through the process of comparing and correcting interpretations. (To give an analogy: the fact that the electronic signals coming from my phone aren't the real voice of my caller does not mean I have no knowledge of my caller's voice and words.)

For the FMS project, "minority" is not a numerical concept, it has to do with power; and it's not just about racial minorities. We begin with the empirical hypothesis that we will learn a lot about our society by looking at the experiences of different minority groups whose one common feature is that they have inadequate access to social institutions because of their identities.

Q: So the term "identity" in this case describes a social relationship, not an inner frame of mind.

A: That's right. In the United States, I see myself as a "person of color." My consciousness of my racial identity helps me make sense of a lot of my experiences; and if I didn't have that concept, I'd just be bewildered in some situations, unable to explain why certain things happen to me with such predictable regularity. If what I just said is true, it is a social fact—not a fact about my inner essence, but rather about the society in which you and I both live. Now let's say I get on a plane one day and land in Kingston, Jamaica, three hours later and get off the plane and proclaim: "I'm a person of color, I'm a person of color." They would have every reason to laugh at me; yet I'm the same person I was three hours earlier! My identity is not about my skin color or my inner feelings about who I am; the concept "person-of-color" refers to the society in which I live. So I'm not a person of color in Jamaica because the term "person of color" doesn't refer—except very minimally—to actual skin color. It's not a descriptive term, it's an analytical term. It refers to my situation and the situation of people who are in the relevant sense like me in a particular society, with its own power structure. Now in saying that, I'm not reifying that identity, making it more rigid. Instead, I'm saying: here is the way this society works; let's try to change society so that these adventitious things (skin color, gender, etc.) won't be so significant. Taking identity seriously can enable us to do good, complex social analysis, the kind of analysis needed to bring about meaningful social transformation.



Q: How does literature help us understand the nature of identity? What's an example from literature of an accurate interpretation of one's identity?

A: Let's go back to the *Lakshmi Purana*. The goddess Lakshmi, when she comes to see the caste attitude of the Brahmin patriarchs, ends up transforming her identity; she gives up a part of it, takes off those resplendent jewels and in effect disavows her role as the goddess of the Puri temple. She says to her husband, "Keep these jewels, they're now yours, O friend of the destitute…. I choose to be an outcaste woman now, a chandaluni." We know that all through history people have done things like this. She isn't just performing the identity of an outcaste woman; in this new context, she gives up part of her former identity as the gracious daughter-in-law of the temple complex—

Q: In order to affirm a connection that is also part of her identity.

A: Yes, to affirm her connection and solidarity with other women and with the outcastes—more forcefully, more consciously and explicitly. And we would say this new identity is justified for two main reasons: it happens to be in accord with her deeper values, and that identity and those values are based on an accurate assessment of the way her society is organized around lines of gender and caste. So if you don't think there is caste prejudice or anti-woman prejudice in her society, then you'll think, "What the heck is she doing? This is crazy." She is after all called the "crazy goddess," "bai thakurani" in Oriya, because there is a folk tradition that sees the goddess Lakshmi as eccentric and, I suppose, subversive.

Q: She's also called "the Mother," or "Ma."

A: Yes, she's the mother-goddess who symbolizes the abundance of the universe (not just wealth), who also ensures well-being and spiritual grace. And it is this mother-goddess who says, I'm leaving you and your sacred temple, to be with others with whom I identify—poor women, outcastes. The general point I'm making, of course, is that this is a transformation that a lot of people go through, not just goddesses in sixteeenth-century Orissa.

Here's another example, one that may seem a bit incongruous at first. In E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, a canonical text that is about class and hence assumed to be about something other than "identity," there is at first a tailor here, a bricklayer there, and a carpenter somewhere else. And, as Thompson shows, they all come together, interpret their own common experiences and social interests, and give up part of their initial identity ("a tailor," "a bricklayer," and so on) so that they can forge a new common identity—namely, the English working class. Now that's a transformation of identity. And you can't deny that it's a rational process: the transformation is based on their coming to see something deeper, something more fundamental about their social situation. The goddess Lakshmi's transformation involves the same kind of process. And so does Paul D.'s transformation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Identity is such a bad word these days, and we want to show that, while, yes, sometimes we retreat into our identities as safe, insular spaces, we often also forge identities that are genuine, that creatively engage the world in order to see it anew and understand it, in order ultimately to change it.

There's a good example from another text from Orissa, a nineteenth-century novel I recently co-translated, called *Six Acres and a Third*. It's considered the first major realist novel in the history of Indian literature, but its narrator is trickster-like, he's always misquoting authority, rebuking, teasing, sometimes the British, sometimes the colonialist mindset of the Indian middle class. At one point, while talking about weavers, one of the lowest castes, and rehearsing the upper-caste prejudices against them, he stops and says to his middle-class Oriya readers: "You know, it's certainly true that weavers are not terribly smart, but don't be too critical of them. Think for a second about the Manchester weavers and how they shook up the British Parliament just a few years ago." Manchester weavers! Who would have thought of calling urban workers in the cotton mills of England "weavers"? Senapati's novel makes that connection in one casual sentence and you could miss it, of course. But when the force of that connection sinks in, you start to think: this is a claim about political identity. There is, after all, a profound connection between the working people of rural Orissa and the working people of Great Britain.

Q: What have you tried to achieve in your work? What is your current project?

A: In my theoretical work, I've focused on some key concepts that are essential for literary and cultural analysis, especially cross-cultural analysis. I have written about cultural relativism, about social identity, about the epistemic status of values, and most recently about the nature of literary reference. I've done this over the last two decades as an attempt to develop a theoretical alternative to postmodernism—an alternative that is "realist" (in the philosophical sense of that term). I have defended two notions that are generally considered suspect these days—sociocultural identity and moral universalism. I believe both of these are indispensable notions in our times, and have tried to sketch what I hope are convincing theoretical accounts of them, showing how the two notions are not only compatible but in fact also complementary.

When I have written directly about literature, whether it is about Toni Morrison or Fakir Mohan Senapati, my theoretical investment in questions of identity and social justice has shaped my choices and goals. One of my more specific goals these days is to understand the role that the social struggles of oppressed groups have played in the development of such universal modern values as egalitarianism and individuality. That project calls for research that is both comparative and multidisciplinary. I believe literary criticism can play a crucial role in shaping such a project.

Tizita: A New World Interpretation

by Dag Woubshet

Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Dag Woubshet emigrated to the United States when he was thirteen. Not so many years later, he received his PhD in the history of American civilization from Harvard University and joined the Cornell University Department of English as an assistant professor, where he has taught courses on the literature of the Black Atlantic and the literature and music of the 1980s. His book project, a study of AIDS elegies in the United States, will include a final chapter on letters from AIDS orphans in Ethiopia. In both his life and his research interests, therefore, Dag has moved across cultures. In this essay, he resists the "seductions" of a certain view of Ethiopia—the view of Ethiopia and its late emperor as a mystic source of inspiration for pan-African consciousness, or what he here calls putting the country in "romantic arrest"—in order to make a more personal contribution to the Diasporic tradition. In the resulting "suggestive comparison," Dag juxtaposes genres of musical nostalgia from both sides of the Atlantic—the traditional tizita ballad of his native Ethiopia and the Negro spirituals of his (also native) North America—as they structure and resonate throughout the final, elegiac novel of James Baldwin.

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ከነገም ተውሶ አምናንም አድሶ
ይመጣል ትዝታ ጓዙን አግበስብሶ::

Tinan'tenan t'so, zaren tentereso
Kenegem teweso, amna'nem adeso
Yemetal tizita gwazun agbesbeso
Outdoing yesterday, shouldering on today,
borrowing from tomorrow, renewing yesteryears,
comes tizita hauling possessions.

—Tizita lyric, in Amharic and English translation

This essay stems from a yearning to connect poetic practices across national boundaries, linking Africa and its Diaspora—by seeking out and fingering the gap that dislocation creates and so redirecting one's own unmoored tongue, which, like water (to borrow from Toni Morrison) "is forever trying to get back to where it was."

In the New World, Ethiopians are late-Diaspora people. For that reason, it would be ahistorical to compare Ethiopian and New World poetics in the ways usually framed by critics and writers of the African Diaspora. One can't assume, for example, that the Middle Passage is the only context. Nor can one succumb to the seductions of Ethiopia as it's romanticized in pan-African discourse, a discourse that has elevated it and constructed its apotheosis, restoration, and return. Nor can such a linking of traditions rely on a transnational, racial nationalism to do all the thinking.

Instead, I want to extend the reaches of Diasporic discourse—and to free up the Ethiopia that is under romantic arrest—by making a suggestive translation, using an element of Ethiopian poetic tradition as a point of reference. In that effort, I bear with me what Ethiopians call *tizita* to offer a reading of an African American novel: James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*.

In Amharic, the word *tizita* has three related meanings. It can mean, in the first place, memory and the act of memory. Some dictionaries parenthetically add nostalgia, or the memory of loss and longing—and nostalgia certainly evokes the word's attendant mood, its melancholy, which is discernible in the way Amharic speakers use it even in the most quotidian exchanges. Secondly, *tizita* refers to one of the scales or modes in secular Ethiopian music, one that conjures up in sonic terms the word's dictionary meaning of nostalgia. Finally, and incorporating the two, *tizita* refers to a signature ballad in the Amharic songbook, which always takes the form of an expression of loss.

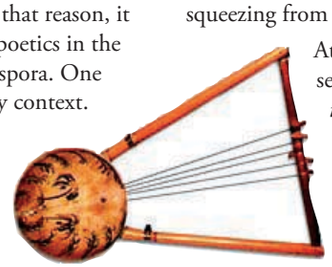
At bottom, *tizita* is a ballad about the memory of love loss. The lovelorn singer takes up as the subject the departed lover and, simultaneously, the unrelieved memory of loss that the lover's departure has prompted. *Tizita* often begins as an apostrophe, a direct address to both the absent lover and memory as a personified abstraction:

ትዝታዬ አንተው ነህ ትዝታም የለብኝ
ትዝታዬ አንተው ነህ ትዝታም የለብኝ
እመጣለሁ እያለክ እየቀረህብኝ::

Tizita'ye antewneh, tizitam yelebgn
Tizita'ye antewneh, tizitam yelebgn
Emetalhu eyalk, eyekereh'ebgn
My tizita is you, I don't have tizita
My tizita is you, I don't have tizita
you say you're coming, yet you never do

Amharic thrives on polysemy. Here the possessive *tizita'ye*, "my tizita," refers to the singer's own melancholy memory but also to the absent lover, since in Amharic the possessive is an ornament placed around certain nouns—"my" love, beauty, life, memory—to show affection in addressing a beloved. The second clause in the first two lines contains another generic trope—the singer's disavowal of all memory but that of love loss—which positions lack and longing as the song's spatial and temporal coordinates (lack is "here," longing is "then"). The third line—the absent lover's empty promise of a return—reprises and affirms the longing stated ambiguously at first.

The longing in *tizita* is without resolution, since the possibility of restoration or return is always thwarted. Unlike other acts of nostalgia that "try to repair longing with belonging," *tizita* is akin to what Svetlana Boym terms "reflective nostalgia," which "thrives in algia, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately." Like the blues, *tizita* keeps alive the apprehension of loss, and even when it reaches to overcome it, does so "not by the consolation of philosophy," as Ralph Ellison puts it, but "by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."



At its worst, a *tizita* ballad is sappy, enamored of its own sentimental excesses. At its best and most expressive, however, *tizita* is fierce and lyrical. It's haunting, for example, in the vocal interpretations of Kassa Tessema, as he improvises with the language and, in his phrasing, creates unexpected gaps, d—laying meaning in words. Seyfou Yohannes interprets *tizita* as a dirge, while Ketema Mekonnen gives it an ironic, tragic-comic emphasis. Or, in the longest recorded *tizita*—

continued on page 6

recorded in October 1974, a month after the Revolution came and deposed Emperor Haile Selassie—we hear an anxious, allegorical exchange between Mahmoud Ahmed (on vocals) and Getachew Mekuria (on tenor saxophone), relaying the mood of a troubled country. Or, in the ornate interpretations of the Diaspora singer Aster Aweke, we hear her amplify glottal bursts in Amharic:

ቸ ኳ ቭ

t'wa, k'wa, ch'wa

—or invent new words with familiar sounds as if yearning to hear the emphatic way the tongue learned to move.

To best appreciate *tizita*, it's worth remembering the often aberrant, often itinerant life of the traditional *azmari* (pl. *azmariwoch*), the troubadours who first introduced *tizita* and other secular modes to the music repertoire. As the composer and musicologist Ashenafi Kebede points out, "the secular *azmari* style flourished alongside the complex style of religious music: in many cases, the secular style heavily borrowed melodic ideas and other techniques of verse improvisation from the sacred choral tradition *zema-k'ne* and, by a process of secularization, transformed and adopted the borrowed material into the stream of *azmari* art music." Some *azmariwoch* in fact began their training in the church's school of music, *zema-bet*, because the Orthodox Church was the main source of artistic creativity and training until the mid-twentieth century. But they either defected or failed to graduate as deacons, and whatever clerical training they had they brought to the service of playing profane music. Other *azmariwoch* were already at the fringes, Kebede adds, since the secular arts were traditionally thought of as "specializations that should be left alone to the handicapped, the failures, beggars, lepers, slaves, loafers, and others that comprise the lowest stratum of the Ethiopian class society."

Thus, the *azmariwoch* neither belonged to the church establishment nor held power in the feudal regime. Without status, title, or land, they roved the country entertaining at large gatherings, or became a staple of *tej-bet*, honey-wine drinking houses where the decorum of the aristocracy gave way to a stylized impropriety. Because they never were, and still are not, beholden to power, they offer striking glimpses of Ethiopian life. As the late poet and playwright Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin observes, the *azmari,* in articulating the censored, demystifying the taboo, resisting easy consolations, "reflects the dreams and the aspirations, the laughter and the tears of the people. He cannot be otherwise. He takes it from the people, and he reinterprets, with his talent, what the people already know about themselves."

As I turn, then, to the American side of the Atlantic—to James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*—I want to carry with me both the *azmari*, the witness from the margins, and his *tizita* mode, in which memory, loss, and music are inextricably bound together.

Published in 1979, *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin's last novel, clearly announces a late style in his fiction. For me, it's a gem novel because it brings together some of Baldwin's finest elements: it's fiercely lyrical, and it relentlessly plumbs interiority. The result is an epic lament that contains at once the story of the gospel singer Arthur Montana and the personal grief of Hall Montana for his deceased brother, Arthur. The novel begins as Hall imagines his brother's death and stammers out a lament:

The damn'd blood burst, first through his nostrils, then pounded through the veins in his neck, the scarlet torrent exploded through his mouth, it reached his eyes and blinded him, and brought Arthur down, down, down, down, down.

To be reconciled with his loss, Hall sets out to remember his brother's journeys. And so we follow the principal characters from Jim Crow time up until the late 1970s; we follow them, too, through Birmingham, Atlanta, Washington, New York, Paris, London, and Abidjan. The fact that Baldwin covers so much temporal and spatial terrain of twentieth-century life gives the novel its epic sweep, and there is something epic about each of the cities as well. "Birmingham, Alabama was the most wicked and loathsome city I had ever seen in my life," says Hall of the city in the 1960s. Jim Crow Atlanta verges on catastrophe, submerged not in water, like its namesake, but fire, flesh burning on Georgia pines. New York City, the hub city in the novel to which the characters return after sojourns elsewhere, is also cast in epic terms. At one point, Hall traces the changing name of the city in order to recover, through its aboriginal name, meaning: "I always like to think that spirit of the violated land has whispered, *thus far, but no farther. Manhattan*, the island on which the city rests, is stronger than New York. As time has begun to indicate; as we shall see."

I'm also calling the novel an epic lament because its principal, formal modes are the epic and the monody (a poem in which one laments a person's death). As we've seen, the novel relates the story of the itinerant Arthur, "the Soul Emperor," our witness-hero, but at the same time it sustains Hall's lament for his beloved brother. Indeed, lament and longing in *Just Above My Head*, far from being peripheral, make up the book's very texture. The key is provided by Baldwin's brilliant use of Negro spirituals. The novel in fact makes little sense without its vast archive of spirituals, fragmented into passages, or indented whole, or placed in free indirect discourse. The text of these lyrics helps to generate meaning, and so does the sound of the songs: in a recorded reading of the novel, Baldwin sang the

The lyrics of the Negro spiritual "Just Above My Head," which inspired the title of James Baldwin's novel. Re-worked as "Just above my head/I hear freedom in the air," the spiritual became a favorite song of the Civil Rights movement.

Just above my head,
I hear music in the air;
Just above my head,
I hear music in the air;
Just above my head,
I hear music in the air;
There must be a God somewhere.

lyrics instead of simply reading them aloud, evoking meaning on multiple registers.

Thinking at once of the spirituals and the Ethiopian *azmari*, I'm struck by the way Baldwin too reinterprets a sacred mode to apprehend love and its loss. In the last chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois makes a chilling observation: in "the sorrow songs of deep successful love there is ominous silence." *Just Above My Head* is Baldwin's ambitious attempt to extend the spirituals to account for love. In the last section of the novel, Hall recognizes his story as "a love song to my brother […] an attempt to face both love and death." Even more, at the tail end of the novel, we witness a remarkable narrative shift from Hall's hands to those of Jimmy, Arthur's lover. Immediately before this shift, Hall says: "Perhaps I must now do what I have most feared to do: surrender my brother to Jimmy, give Jimmy's piano the ultimate solo: which must also now be taken as the bridge." It's at this bridge in the story that I *hear* the change in tune from Hall's embrace of the spirituals to Jimmy's *tizita*. Even though it may be a different tongue, in Jimmy's solo, in his melancholy groove, I hear clearly the resonances of *tizita*.

In the same way as *tizita* embodies memory, loss, longing, and song, Baldwin sutures the novel, using the same threads. And as he interprets twentieth-century American life with such lyricism and insight, we should listen to the *azmari*, who from the margins of the Old World, also makes our cries, memory, and music audible. For music, as Baldwin says, "don't begin like a song. Forget all that bullshit you hear. Music can get to be a song, but it starts with a cry. That's all."

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Student Activities in English

[Editor's note: This article, which was prepared by Jonathan Senchyne, is the first in what will be a regular feature on undergraduates and graduates doing English studies at Cornell.]

Undergraduate and graduate students typically live in Ithaca and study in residence, yet students in English frequently move the discipline out of the classroom and into the world. As one of our handbooks suggests, a student studying in residence "comprehends more than attending seminars and writing papers." The PhD, MFA, and BA students frequently plan and participate in projects that defy the popular notion of English majors as isolated bookworms, hermetically sealed in libraries and classrooms, disengaged from the world around them. In the last year, students in the department have engaged the world in discussions about the restructuring of global and intellectual borders, as public advocates for poetry in everyday life, and as scholars abroad.

Reading Groups

One of the most typical forms of extracurricular involvement for graduate students is participation in reading groups where members engage in self-directed study and discussion in their disciplines. PhD students Karen Bourrier and Melissa Gniadek, coordinators of the Victorian Reading Group and the Nineteenth-Century American Reading Group respectively, wondered what outcomes might result if the two groups embraced a common focus instead of maintaining the rigid divisions of their British/American biases. The result of their border rearrangement was the "Transatlantic Nineteenth-Century Day," which brought together students and faculty whose intellectual work focuses on different sides of the Atlantic so they might think about continuities and exchanges. The interaction between reading groups maintains the local interests of each while fostering new collaborations under the aegis of the growing field of "transatlanticism."

Poetry in Your Pocket Day

This past April, MFA students traveled to New York City to participate in Poetry in Your Pocket Day, a project associated with National Poetry Month. According to Jared Harel, MFA '08, the day demonstrates the accessibility of poetry by bringing down barriers to literature and pushing it into the everyday—where its audience is. "Poetry is . . . portable, it can be read on a subway or memorized or simply put in your pocket," Harel says. During the event—which is held in Bryant Park where the life of the city creates an atmosphere of possibility and diversity for readers and listeners—Harel and others read aloud to parkgoers and passersby. "Bryant Park's Reading Room is not actually a room at all, but a really cozy area of the park with chairs, umbrellas, and even a portable bookshelf," he says. "Anyone who wants can stop by and listen, and anyone reading is essentially reading to the city at large."

Study Abroad

Ariel Estevez, an undergraduate major, is currently writing to the Cornell community at large, blogging about his study-abroad experience in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Estevez is studying Spanish and Argentine literatures in addition to advanced Castelleno, a language class aided by his immersion in a Spanish-language university. Estevez cites the impact of his freshman and sophomore courses, which stressed writing as an important step in his development as a writer for public audiences. In addition to blogging for Cornell's official blog network, he is also a writer for the *Cornell Daily Sun*. Estevez has taken more than these technical lessons to heart in Argentina. "When I came to Argentina," he says, "I had very different ideas and assumptions about how society should work." Being a literature student encouraged him to take a more contemplative approach in his interactions. "Rather than closed-mindedly using my assumptions to guide me through new experiences, I use the same tactics I would use when reading literature to find a deeper, more complex understanding of things. I try to view events from someone else's perspective, not just my own." Navigating a new culture and a new language, and reporting these experiences back to friends, family, and interested readers has allowed Estevez to find a "deeper, more complex understanding" of what he finds in the world. He has found that close reading and developed interpretive skills, hallmarks of any course in the department, "lead to better judgment." Whether they use these skills to rethink geography, to encourage literary reading, or to be reflective citizens, Cornell English students continue to find ways to apply even the most abstract lessons to life in the world.

Cornell Cast video of Poem in Your Pocket Day: www.cornell.edu/video/details.cfm?vidID=218&display=preferences

Ariel Estevez's CU Abroad blog: https://blogs.cit.cornell.edu/cua_ae75

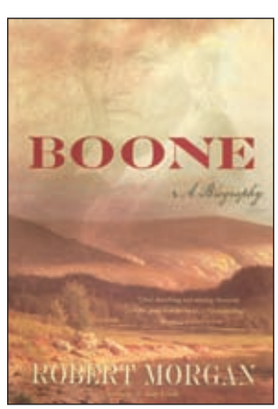
Focus on Books

Alison Case and Harry E. Shaw, *Reading the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Blackwell's, 2008)

For nearly thirty years, Harry Shaw has been one of America's ablest readers and theorists of the British novel; his *Narrating Reality* (1999) stands as perhaps the finest treatment in English of the realist novel as a special form of representing historical process. In this book—the latest in the series *Reading the Novel*, edited by Dan Schwarz—Shaw teams up with his former student Alison Case (PhD 1991), now a professor of English at Williams College. These ten essays on twelve novels provide a penetrating survey of the richest period of British fiction, from *Pride and Prejudice* to *Middlemarch*; they are both accessible introductions and astutely original readings. If they hold one guiding assumption, it's that language is by nature dialogic (as described by the great Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin), bearing in each sentence the marks of earlier exchanges and other voices, and that in fiction the narrator is a privileged focus of discursive dialogue. Each chapter devotes considerable space to close readings of passages, and a valuable appendix on free indirect discourse clarifies some of the technical issues in narration. But for Case and Shaw, close attention to technique is important not just for its own sake but for opening up the larger dimensions of literary response, including historical context. "To read a novel richly means to perform it, as one would a musical score," they write in their introduction. "We hope that our readings of passages will provide a model for this kind of performance that will carry over into our readers' own approach to works of fiction." The authors' respect both for their own readers and for their novelists' insights into "what it means to be human" makes this book valuable to anyone interested in literature, including experts, but perhaps especially to those who would like to look back again at a favorite text, while enjoying a sample of contemporary criticism at its best.

Robert Morgan, *Boone* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2007)

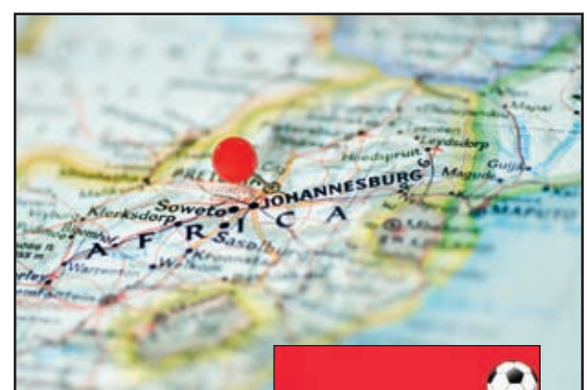
Bob Mogan is the author of eight books of fiction, including *Gap Creek* (which was chosen as an Oprah Winfrey Book Club selection) and *The Balm of Gilead Tree*, a selection of his short stories; he has also written twelve books of poetry, including *Green River: New and Selected Poems*; and a volume of essays and interviews. Throughout this huge oeuvre, he has presented a complex portrait of a human landscape in the most literal sense: a material environment and a history of people vitally interlocked in struggle and change. In bringing to life the experiences of farmers and itinerants in the western Carolinas, from earliest frontier days to the present moment, he's also fashioned an immensely flexible style, varying from colloquial first-person prose narratives to carefully wrought, concretely precise lyrical poetry—a style that has always defied traditional boundaries between genres and that now, in his first work of biography, modulates into a vivid yet concrete and precise vehicle for the conveying of history. At once a work of careful scholarship and a lyrical re-imagining of a distance past, *Boone* brings to life a complex figure: legislator and naturalist, a Freemason, a soldier, a lover of the land, and an early conservationist. A brilliant concluding chapter counterpoints Boone's life with an account of the legend. By presenting Boone to a modern reader as a human being rather than a legend, Morgan recreates a special form of heroism and a set of values pertinent to the present day. According to Michael Kammen, professor emeritus of history at Cornell, this is "the best of all possible Boones."

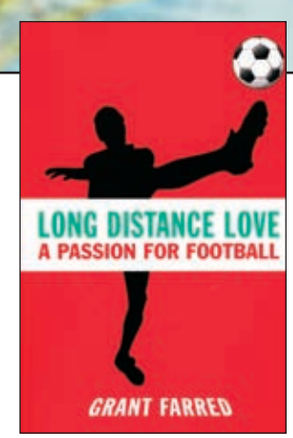


Grant Farred, *Long Distance Love: A Passion for Football* (Temple University Press, 2008)

Long Distance Love is Grant Farred's first book to appear since he joined the English Department last fall. It's an original and startling work that defies easy definition. The subtitle indicates that the "love" of the title is not for a woman, and the first pages of the book indicate the "passion" of the subtitle is not just for football. Moving from apartheid South Africa to the Argentina of the "dirty war" to the Spain of Franco to a final match in Liverpool, Farred gives us at once a fan's autobiography, a journalistic eyewitness to political struggle, a skilled account of a sport, and a work of cultural studies that by its example helps define what's best and vital about cultural studies as a field of writing. It's also a powerful meditation on the meaning of identity in a globalized world. On page five, Farred introduces himself and his subject in this way:

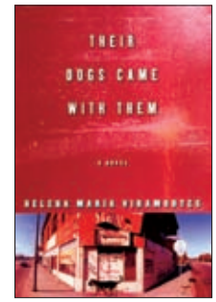
"I am South African by birth, but I do not identify with the nation—I did not in its apartheid instantiation, I do not fit in its 'democratic' instantiation. I have lived in the USA for the great majority of my adult life, but I make no claims to being an American. South Africa is where I was born, but it is only partly who I am. America is where I live and work, but it does not begin to define me. National identity is not ontology. Besides, as someone who is not a lover of the nation—not the one of my birth, not the one I live in, or any other—I never support a country during the World Cup. I only root for Liverpool players representing their country... Liverpool FC [Football Club] is who I am. It is my primary form, arguably my only form, of affective identification."



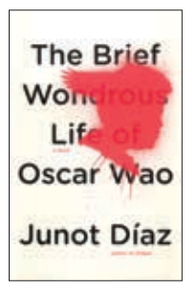


Farred's combination of whimsy and earnestness raises a host of questions: What is the relationship between the game and the life? In a multicultural world, what's the connection between the older concept of nation and the new phenomenon of an international audience? What kind of politics does globalization make possible or deny—and what new forms of identity? Like the work of Mohanty and Woubshet, Farred's book also exemplifies the claim that this issue of *English at Cornell* has been making: reading—and experiencing—across cultures is a skill needed for everyone in the twenty-first century and one that literary study is uniquely constituted to develop.

U.S. Latino/a Fiction from Cornell



This spring Junot Díaz won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Díaz's hero is an obese "ghetto geek" who, like his author, was born in the Dominican Republic and lives in Paterson, New Jersey, and whose adventures in this novel are held together by a voice the *New York Times* calls "profane, lyrical, learned, and tireless, a riot of accents and idioms coexisting within a single personality."



Díaz first became widely-known for *Drown*, a collection of stories in 1996 that has become a landmark of contemporary fiction and which first saw life as an MFA thesis at Cornell. (He returned this spring to give a highly successful reading in the annual writers' series.)

But he is not the only distinguished fiction writer of Hispanic descent associated with the Cornell department. Two years ago, the department hired Ernesto Quiñonez [see the 2007 issue of *English at Cornell*], whose novels *Bodega Dreams* and *Chango's Fire* brilliantly explore the struggles and hopes of immigrant youth growing up in Spanish Harlem. And Quiñonez's senior colleague at Cornell (and the teacher of Junot Díaz) is Helena Maria Viramontes, the well-known author of *Moths*, a short-story collection, and the novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*.

Viramontes's recent novel, *Their Dogs Came With Them* (Atria Books, 2007), represents a new level of complexity and emotional intensity to U.S. Latino/a fiction. Its interwoven chapters follow the lives of young people who live in the same neighborhood of East Los Angeles—including a female gang member, a young missionary, a mentally ill college student, and a schoolgirl—as they move through a momentous twenty-four hours towards a climax that unites them in a single, blinding moment. The title comes from an Aztec account of the conquest of Mexico, in which the Spaniards are seen advancing with glittering weapons and armor and salivating dogs; but the dogs of Viramontes's novel are victims of a rabies quarantine rather than aggressors. Each night, Latino residents must line up with photo IDs before returning to their neighborhoods, while helicopters with floodlights and machine guns search out stray dogs wandering the streets. Tranquillina, the young missionary, fondly remembers a vision of her father miraculously levitating over the desert between Mexico and a Promised Land to the north; but in the Los Angeles of the present, the floodlit helicopters are angels of death, not life, even though Tranquillina's undaunted faith holds promise of redemption more powerful than the weapons of the new conquistadores. The incident of the quarantine is fictional and therefore metaphorical of a repeated relationship of conquest and suppression, with the dogs of the conquistadores reappearing as figures of the immigrant "underclass," but the novel is true to the experience of the police campaign of harassment and surveillance instituted between the two great uprisings in 1965 and 1992. These parallels make *Their Dogs Came With Them* a complex meditation on politics and history, yet it never loses its focus on its main characters. For a reader who has undergone the novel's shattering power, the characters—with their weakness, faith, self-betrayal, and indomitable courage—remain in the memory as living beings long after the last page has been turned.

The works of two other former MFA students deserve mention. In 2004 Herman Carrillo published *Loosing my Espanish*, a powerful fusion of history and memory presented as the final "lesson" of a high school teacher about to lose his job in Chicago. And in 2007 Manuel Muñoz followed up his powerful collection *Zigzagger Stories* (2003) with *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue*, stories that explore the lives and experiences of gay Chicanos living in the central valleys of California.

From a Chicano migrant family to a Gatsby-like druglord in Spanish Harlem; from Trujillo's Dominican Republic to the turbulent ninety miles between Castro's Cuba and the southern United States: the cultural range of these lives and locations indicates the richness of contemporary U.S. Latino/a writing. It also suggests that Cornell has become a leading center of this work.

Retiring: Sandra Siegel

Sandra Siegel retired in June after forty-three years in the English Department—the longest record of any present faculty member. A native New Yorker, she graduated from Hunter College with a degree in philosophy and received her PhD in literature in 1968 from the Committee on Social Thought of the University of Chicago. By that point she'd been teaching at Cornell for three years. That was in a different era, when the talented spouses of male junior faculty often signed on to teach writing courses as lecturers without tenure while raising their children. In 1973, she joined her mostly male colleagues in a tenure-track appointment, ultimately becoming the third woman tenured by English.

Over those years, Sandra became a widely recognized specialist in Anglo-Irish modernism. Her edition of the manuscripts of Yeats's play *Purgatory* came out in 1986 as a volume in the *Cornell Yeats*, edited by Stephen Parrish, and she has since then published numerous essays on Yeats's contemporaries. Throughout her work, she has focused on the marginalized, the quirky, the anomalous—women, the Irish, dandies, gay men, decadents. One figure combining most of these traits is, of course, Oscar Wilde, about whom she has had much to say—in courses, lectures, conferences, and essays that range from focused, scholarly studies to broad-ranging observations on Wilde's contemporary significance and re-imaginings.

In 1976 Sandra's teaching was recognized by the Clark Outstanding Teaching Award—she was one of earliest members of the department to receive this honor. But her teaching has always extended beyond Cornell: she's lectured or held fellowships at Princeton, the National University of Ireland in Galway, New York University, Peking University, the University of Indonesia, and the Payne-Whitney Clinic in New York, among many other places.

Fortunately for those many who have been touched by her loyalty and generosity, Sandra has always come back. But she's likely to keep traveling in spirit if not in body. She's already taken up a sketching pad and begun work on a new career as an artist—probably not her last.

Faculty Notes

Changing of the Guard

This summer **Molly Hite** retired from the chairmanship of the English department. During her term, she led the department with characteristic energy, focus, and high spirits. Remarkably, she presided over eleven hires—the largest number for such a short period in the recent memory of the department—which include joint hires in Feminist, Gender, & Sexuality Studies; the Africana Studies and Research Center; and the Department of Theater, Film and Dance. These hires, and the interdisciplinary connections they are forging, will crucially shape the department's identity for years to come.

Ellis Hanson, who succeeds Molly as chair for a three-year term, graduated from Vassar in 1987 and received his PhD from Princeton before coming to Cornell in 1995. He has quickly acquired a reputation as one of the nation's wittiest and most astute practitioners of queer theory and criticism. His first book, *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997), argued that male decadent authors developed a queer identity through an absorption in Christian imagery and ritual. His second book, *Out Takes*, collects essays on gay and lesbian cinema and on queer themes in popular entertainment. His courses, including the large lecture course on Desire, are consistently among the most popular in the undergraduate English curriculum; he has also been an active graduate advisor and has served on the steering committees of both Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Studies and Feminist, Gender, & Sexuality Studies.

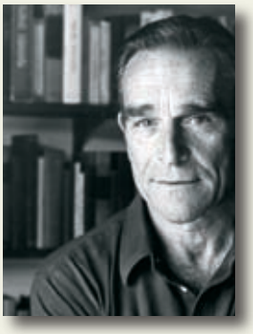
Hanson will be assisted this year by a board of five colleagues: Grant Farred (assistant chair), Laura Donaldson (director of undergraduate studies), Andrew Galloway (director of graduate studies), Helena Viramontes (director of creative writing), and Laura Brown (director of graduate student teaching).

Farewells

This year four members of the English Department moved on to jobs elsewhere. After three years gracing the teaching of Romantic literature, **Anna-Lise Francois** returned to the University of California, Berkeley. **Nicole Waligora-Davis**, a devoted scholar and teacher of African American literature, will be teaching at Rice University in Texas. **Liz DeLoughry**, who brought original expertise in the literature and culture of island peoples, has moved to the English Department at UCLA. And after several years on leave, **Biodun Jeyifo** reluctantly resigned from the department to accept a permanent position at Harvard. (Readers of this newsletter will recall the cover story devoted to "BJ," "The World De-Colonized," in the 2002 issue.) These colleagues will be deeply missed.

In Memoriam

Anthony Caputi (1924–2008)



Anthony Caputi, professor emeritus of English at Cornell, died in Ithaca on February 6, after a long illness.

Tony was born in Buffalo, New York, the son of Italian immigrants (his father was an ice-cream vendor). After active service in World War II, he graduated from the University of Buffalo on the G.I. Bill and received his PhD in English from Cornell, specializing in the dramatic literature of the English Renaissance. From 1956 until his retirement in 1991 he was a professor of English and comparative literature, serving as chairs of both departments. He also was the recipient of two Fulbright Fellowships and a Guggenheim.

His first book, *John Marston, Satirist* (1961), treats intensively the works of a contemporary of Shakespeare's. Caputi's friend and colleague Barry Adams still recalls his first encounter with the book nearly half a century ago, when he was a beginning instructor looking for approaches to teaching the Renaissance: "It was full of teachable stuff, but also first-rate critical and scholarly stuff, all of it in prose that was unpretentious, workmanlike, and accessible. Tony's analysis of Marston's 'seriocomic view' as a matter of tone rather than intellectual substance I found especially stimulating, and his account of Marston's career with respect to its integrity and consistency provided any number of points of entry and departure." Adams also recalls Caputi's essay on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*—another masterpiece of "seriocomic" tone—for among other things its analysis of how in the last act the machinery of the plot is thrown into "reverse."

From work on the English Renaissance, Caputi moved on to a two-volume anthology of Western drama from the Romans to the present. Some of the material in his introductions—in particular, his treatment of Roman mime and pantomime and their roots in the *fabula Atellana*—in turn contributed to his next major project, a comprehensive study of low comedy (*Buffo: The Genius of Vulgar Comedy* [1988]). His final volume of criticism, *Pirandello and the Crisis of Modern Consciousness* (1988), rounds off his work in the twentieth century.

By the time of this book, he had already embarked on a second career as a creative writer. In 1974, he published his first novel, *Loving Evie*, which concerns a professor's love affair with a favorite student; his second, *Storms and Son*, followed eleven years later. His story "The Derby Hopeful" won an O. Henry Award in 1979. Caputi was also a gifted amateur actor at Cornell, whose most notable role was as Richard III.

In retirement, Caputi had the good fortune of extended visits to Rome before his final illness. As a teacher and colleague, as a scholar and administrator, as an actor and creative writer, he played his many parts with an unmatched exuberance, generosity, and zest for life that will long remain in our memory.

NEW FACULTY

Members

Kevin Attell joined the English Department this year as an assistant professor. He received his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley in 2003 and was a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities at Johns Hopkins. His research focuses on twentieth-century American and British literature as well as literary theory. He is currently working on two book projects. *National Characters*, a study of the novels of Pynchon, Rushdie, and Joyce, examines the idea of fiction as a form of national epic. His other book concerns the contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, whose books *The Open* and *State of Exception* he has translated. Attell's interests are reflected in his teaching at Cornell, which includes courses on paranoia in contemporary American fiction and film, the reading of fiction, and American literature from 1865 to the present, as well as a graduate course on Agamben.

Jeremy Braddock, assistant professor of English, received his PhD from the University of Pennsylvania in 2002. He has taught at Princeton and, before coming to Cornell, was faculty fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center. His research concerns the relationships among artists, institutions, and cultural intermediaries in the American interwar period, in particular those involving modernist and African American literary culture. His book-in-progress, titled *Collecting as Modernist Practice*, is a study of art collections, anthologies, and archives. A second interest is in film studies; the book he co-edited, *Directed by Allen Smithee* (Minnesota 2001), examines the politics of the directorial pseudonym in Hollywood. This fall he will be teaching a graduate class on modernist collaborations and collectivities and an undergraduate seminar about the relationship of documentary technologies and literature in the 1930s and 1960s.

Grant Farred, who obtained his PhD from Princeton University in 1997, joins the Africana Studies and English departments at Cornell University from the Program in Literature at Duke University. His most recent book, *Long Distance Love: A Passion for Football* (Temple University Press) was published in February [see "Focus on Books" on page eight of this newsletter]. His previous books are on South African literature and culture (*Midfielder's Moment: Literature and Culture in Contemporary South Africa*), black vernacular intellectuals (*What's My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals*), and race and globalization (*Phantom Calls: Race and the Globalization of the NBA*). He is also the general editor of the journal *South Atlantic Quarterly*, a position he has held since May 2002. Starting this fall, he will serve both as director of graduate studies in the Africana Studies and Research Center and as associate chair in English.

Jane Juffer comes to Cornell with a joint appointment in the English Department and in Feminist, Gender, & Sexuality Studies. She previously taught English at Pennsylvania State University, where she was also director of the Latino/a Studies Initiative. She has written two books, both published by New York University Press: *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life*, and *Single Mother: The Emergence of the Domestic Intellectual*. Her other work includes articles on Latino studies at the corporate university, the U.S.-Mexico border, migration, and domesticity. Her current research project examines how religion is shaping Latino/Latin American migration in the United States, using an ethnographic approach that will focus on communities in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic. At Cornell she'll be teaching cultural studies, Latino studies, and feminist theory.

Jenny Mann received her PhD from Northwestern University in 2006 and joins the Cornell faculty as an assistant professor after a one-year fellowship. Her research and teaching interests include sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British literature and culture, with a particular focus on the history of rhetoric, history of science, and gender studies. Her book-in-progress, *Outlaw Rhetoric: Figuring Vernacular Eloquence in Early Modern England*, argues that the translation of classical rhetoric into the everyday vernacular becomes a means of literary and national invention in the sixteenth century. Reading rhetorical handbooks alongside plays, poems, and prose romances, she shows how the translation of Greek and Latin figures of speech into English functions as a kind of plot generator, turning classical figures of transport and exchange into native stories of fairies and Robin Hood. At Cornell her teaching includes a graduate seminar on Renaissance rhetoric, as well as undergraduate seminars on Shakespeare and other dramatists, and a course on the relationship between literature and the scientific revolution in England.

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Posthumous Award

When Scott McMillin died in March 2006 he was at the height of his productive powers, leaving two manuscripts virtually completed. One, a study of the early texts of *Othello*, will appear soon under the editorship of Scott's junior colleague Rayna Kalas; the other, *The Musical as Drama*, was published by Princeton University Press in 2006. This spring, the English Department learned that *The Musical as Drama* was the unanimous choice for the George Jean Nathan Award for the year's finest achievement in dramatic criticism.

The *Musical as Drama* reflects Scott's lifelong passion for American popular music of the twentieth century, a passion he translates into precise observation and close argument. Just as characteristically, Scott champions an underdog—in this case a form often dismissed as commercial and mindless. Denying that the musical is in any sense an "integrated" form, he finds its value instead in a fundamental disjunction between dramatic action and the "numbers" that interrupt it—a feature deriving from its roots in popular entertainment. This dis-integration, Scott argues, allows the characters to step out of dramatic time into another dimension that he calls "lyric time," which in turn challenges conventional expectations of psychological realism. And while acknowledging the form's collusion with a vapid commercial economy, he can still take musicals seriously for their political value. As he writes:

"*West Side Story* is about the violence of a younger generation with nothing productive to do. *Cabaret* is about fascism in an urban society caught up in heedless entertainments. *A Chorus Line* is about sexuality in the theatre, which means to an important extent gay sexuality. *Sweeney Todd* is about injustice and the pressure for revenge among the powerless in industrialized cities. People who find these issues unimportant do not pay attention to politics, and the shows I have named are among the most revivable American dramas of the past half-century. They are also among the musicals that connect with the broadly popular forms of song-and-dance entertainment that gave rise to the genre in the first place."

The voice in passages like this one is lively yet measured, witty yet urgent—the voice of one who loved to debate and describe and listen and praise. For those who knew and loved Scott, reading these pages is both a poignant reminder of loss and a source of comfort: the man is gone but the voice remains, still teaching us how to read, and listen, and enjoy, and make sense of the world.