

# Letters

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## When the Fringe Dwarfs the Center: Vernacular Islam beyond the Arab World

*An Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar convened by Samira Sheikh, Associate Professor of History; Tony K. Stewart, Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Chair in Humanities, Religious Studies; David J. Wasserstein, Eugene Greener, Jr. Professor of Jewish Studies, History*



Tony K. Stewart

Since September 2001, the news media have been regularly convulsed by events taking place in the “Muslim world,” both in the Middle East and in the United States. Popular media, and consequently the public, regularly conflate “Muslim” with “Arab.” But “Arabs,” or Arabic-speaking Muslims, comprise only a small proportion of the world’s Muslims. For centuries, the overwhelming majority of Muslims have lived far from the symbolic Arab heartland and do not speak Arabic. South Asia (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh) has a Muslim population twenty times that of Saudi Arabia, Indonesia nearly ten times, and Nigeria some three times. Today’s popular image of homogenized Islam radiating from its Middle Eastern center obscures a complex history of vernacular Islam on the so-called “fringes.” In these local Islams the shape of the religion and its accompanying polity are adapted to and reshaped by local cultures, ranging from West Africa to Central Asia, and from China to India and Indonesia. There are as many Islams as languages of Muslims, even among those conservatives who insist on a single uniform Islam.

Everywhere Islam has taken root, it has habituated itself to its locale and adapted to local custom. All these versions of Islam clearly show the effects of their ethnic and linguistic environments and are distinctly shaped by their interactions with other religious traditions. This staggering variety in ritual practice, cultural customs, sanctioned forms of governance, and of course theology, creates both unexpected alliances and equally unpredictable tensions among the local communities. As Arjun Appadurai has argued, even the smallest of differences among tiny religious or political factions can generate enormous repercussions in our increasingly globalized world.<sup>1</sup> Difference matters, no matter how insignificant differences may seem to those observing from the outside.

Islamic reformers who rely on a tie to the Arab center for their authority often make their way to the so-called “fringe” areas where they attempt to intervene in the practice of Islam that has taken on a distinctly local form. In so doing, these reformers often create new and exacerbate old tensions among the different communities, usually in their zeal to eradicate what they label local accretions. There is no small irony in the fact that each spokesperson for reform promotes a different vision of an ideal Islam—even there we find no unanimity, though strict uniformity is often precisely what is argued as the foundation of universal Islam. It is likewise important to understand that this move to universal Islam is generally equated with fundamentalism, but reform does not automatically take that shape. The ability of vernacular forms of

### Last Issue

This is the final issue of Letters. Next year we will begin publishing an annual report highlighting the work of the Warren Center. To stay up-to-date on Warren Center programs, please visit our website at [http://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw\\_center](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw_center). You can also sign up for our weekly e-newsletter on the main page of our website.

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Islam to accommodate local cultural practices, to demonstrate the malleability of the basic propositions of the Islamic message using languages other than Arabic, bespeaks a different kind of universality. This adaptability is possible precisely because vernacular Islams are not grounded in a literal replication of the Arab-centric ideals that would require fringe communities to import alien cultural norms and practices. Rather, careful selection and “translation” ensures the successful development of Islam within radically different cultural frames.

Political responses to these widely divergent forms of Islam—from local governments to international interests—have often been uninformed and therefore ill-conceived, partly because of academic failure to understand and communicate the complex historical vectors that generate these local Islams. We argue that as most Muslims live in the “fringes,” we need to problematize the notions of center and periphery, the relationship of the symbolic core to its ever-expanding outlying majority, and the latter’s creative adaptations of Islam. Mapping and interrogating the growth of the huge variety of vernacular forms of Islam is the necessary first step towards determining what is deemed variable and what essential in these formations.

Since 2013, the Islamic Studies faculty of Vanderbilt University have hosted and participated in a series of four intensive workshops on Islam in a range of historical contexts. These workshops were held under the rubric *Being Muslim: How Local Islam Overturns Narratives of Exceptionalism*. Supported generously by the Fant Fund, the four workshops brought 57 scholars of all ranks and area specializations to Vanderbilt to discuss the proposition that the history of Islam is a history of local innovations by Muslims who have made Islam their own wherever they live. Through the *Being Muslim* workshops, the Islamic Studies faculty of Vanderbilt began the process of re-assessing and decentering the history of Muslims. In the Sawyer Seminar in 2015-16, we hope to go further, to begin to identify the historical trajectories that have encouraged

successful vernacularization.

The participants in the Sawyer Seminar include Vanderbilt faculty from the departments of history (Sheikh, Ochonu), history and Jewish Studies (Wasserstein, Cohen), religious studies (Stewart, McGregor, Taneja, Bell), and art history (Latif), two graduate students from the department of history (Koul, Murrell), and a post-doctoral scholar (Birchok) selected by open competition. Our discussions at the Robert Penn Warren Center will be divided into four modules spread over the two semesters. Each module will begin with common readings of two or three significant books on the topic at hand, punctuated with visits by major scholars from other institutions, for sustained discussion of those focal issues. Each six-week module will also include presentations of participants’ own work.

The first module, *Languages of Islam*, will open up for discussion the influence of non-Arab languages in producing authoritative and devotional expressions of Muslims. We will begin by discussing Muzaffar Alam’s *The Languages of Political Islam* (Chicago, 2004), an influential presentation of the argument that Persianate ethics and literary forms have shaped Islam in South Asia. Professor Alam will visit us later in the semester from the University of Chicago. The module will also include a discussion of Nancy Florida’s work on Sufi poetry from southeast Asia, and of Vanderbilt faculty members’ writings, a chapter from Anand Vivek Taneja’s work-in-progress on Islam and history in Delhi, India, and Stewart’s draft translation and article on a sixteenth-century Indian text named the *Iblis-nāma*, which purports to be a colloquy between Iblis (or Satan) and the Prophet Muhammad and is composed in a unique and controversial Islamicized idiom called Musalmani Bangla (Bengali).

In the second module, our attention will be focused on the question of authority in Islam. The prescriptive egalitarianism of the Qur’an has in practice been subordinated to a host of manifestations of power, religious, political, and social. One of the most influential authors on the debates around Islamic authority is Muhammad Qasim Zaman whose most recent work, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism* (Cambridge, 2012), is an analysis of the debates on law, rights, and justice among Muslim scholars in the Middle East

and South Asia since the nineteenth century. For an incisive analysis of sectarianism and authority in modern Islam that cautions us against seeing all Muslim practice as derived from Arab precedents, we will read Teena Purohit’s *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India* (Harvard, 2012). The module will also feature readings on Islam in west Africa as well as a discussion of the William S. Vaughn Visiting Fellow Daniel Birchok’s work on female Sufi saints in Indonesia.

When we reconvene in January 2016, the first module will lead us to investigate the material and cultural environments of Islam and Muslims. We will read Finbarr Barry Flood’s *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval “Hindu-Muslim” Encounter* (Princeton, 2009), a book that offers a compelling reading of architecture, painting, trade objects (even coins), and texts as products of a process of translation in the interface between premodern Muslims and Hindus. For a provocative argument about Islam and the environment in modern Bangladesh and Pakistan, we will read recent articles by anthropologist Naveeda Khan of Johns Hopkins University, as well as chapters from book manuscripts by Vanderbilt colleagues, Riyaz Latif (art history), on fourteenth-century Moroccan religious buildings, and Dianna Bell (religious studies), on contemporary religious figures in Mali.

For our final module we propose to investigate the recent—and often unforeseen—political developments that have succeeded the Arab Spring. One session will be devoted to a discussion with incoming Senior Lecturer in Arabic, Issam Eido, after a reading of his historically sensitive account of the horrific conflicts in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq recently published in the online journal *Jadaliyya*. We will also discuss Vanderbilt colleague and seminar participant Moses Ochonu’s historically-inflected work on the Sokoto Caliphate and Islamic radicalism in northern Nigeria, as well as key readings on contemporary Pakistan and Indonesia. We hope participants in the seminar will gain a wider and deeper understanding of Islam and Muslims in their varied habitats from the rigorous and wide-ranging set of readings and critical engagement with key visiting scholars, and bring their insights into their research and teaching, as well as to their civic lives.

In the 2016 fall term, the seminar participants and the Warren Center will host a conference open to the Vanderbilt community and the public to share results of the year’s work.

1 Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).



Samirah Sheikh



David J. Wasserstein

## The Common Good and NEH at 50 2015-2016 Harry C. Howard Jr. Lecture

William Adams, chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, will present the 2015-2016 Harry C. Howard Jr. Lecture on Tuesday, October 27, 2015 at 4:10 p.m. at the Central Library Community Room of the Jean & Alexander Heard Libraries. Adams will discuss “The Common Good and NEH at 50.”

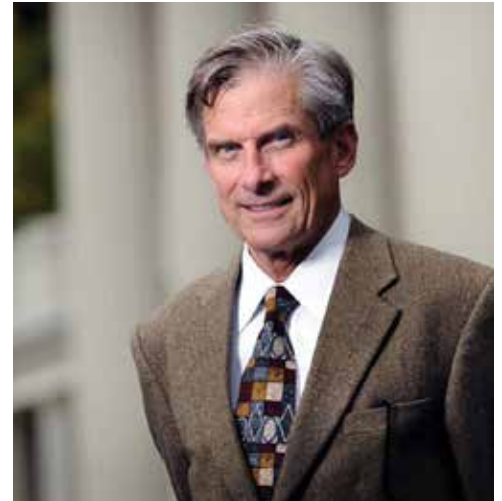
Prior to joining the NEH, Adams served as president of Colby College in Maine where he led a \$376-million capital campaign—the largest in Maine history. He also spearheaded a formal collaboration between the college and the Maine Film Center.

A native of Birmingham, Michigan, Adams struggled during his first year as an undergraduate at Colorado College. That’s when he took time off and enlisted in the Army; he spent three years in the service, including one year in Vietnam. Adams credits that period in his life for inspiring him to pursue an educa-

tion in the humanities.

“It made me serious in a certain way,” he says. “And as a 20-year-old combat infantry advisor, I came face to face, acutely, with questions that writers, artists, philosophers, and musicians examine in their work—starting with, ‘What does it mean to be human?’”

After his military service, he returned to Colorado College where he earned his undergraduate degree in philosophy in 1972 and later a Ph.D. from the University of California at Santa Cruz. He studied in France as a Fulbright Scholar before teaching appointments in political philosophy at Santa Clara University in California and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He went on to coordinate the Great Works in Western Culture program at Stanford University and to serve as vice president and secretary of Wesleyan University. He became president of Bucknell University in 1995 and president of Colby College in 2000. He was appointed chair of the NEH



Chairman William Adams

by President Barack Obama in 2014.

The Harry C. Howard Jr. Lecture Series was established in 1994 through the endowment of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas E. Nash, Jr., and Mr. and Mrs. George D. Renfro, all of Asheville, North Carolina. The lecture honors Harry C. Howard Jr. (B.A., 1951).

## 2016-2017 Warren Center Fellowship Opportunities

The Warren Center will sponsor two fellowship programs in the 2016-2017 academic year: one for faculty members and one for Vanderbilt University graduate students.

The 2016-2017 Faculty Fellows Program will be directed by Brooke Ackerly (Associate Professor of Political Science) and Melissa Snarr (Associate Professor of Ethics and Society, Divinity School). The year-long interdisciplinary seminar is entitled “Working for Equality and Justice: Theorizing from and with Lived Resistance to Economic Inequality and Injustice.”

Recently, the issue of economic inequality has again risen to the forefront of public discussion with the social scientific scholarly work of people such as Thomas Piketty

(*Capital in the Twenty-First Century*) and Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman’s analysis of U.S. tax records. Participants will turn to the humanities for the study of inequality and injustice in two ways. First, the seminar will consider how scholarship in the humanities can be informed by the experiences of those people who are living with the inequalities and injustices that are being explored. Secondly, Fellows will look to humanistic scholarship to tell us how to do this work well.

The Warren Center will sponsor a Visiting Fellow with expertise in the area of study, in addition to selected members of the Vanderbilt faculty. Information regarding the application process can be obtained from the Warren Center website.

The Warren Center will also sponsor an

interdisciplinary year-long Graduate Student Fellows Program. Vanderbilt University graduate students in the traditional humanities departments or those whose work is of a humanistic nature are invited to apply for the seven dissertation-completion fellowships. The fellowship provides a stipend as well as a modest research fund. Students are not allowed to hold any other form of employment during the term of the fellowship. The Graduate Student Fellows will meet in weekly seminars at the Warren Center, giving presentations from their work to the seminar and discussing texts of common interest. Fellows will also be expected to be active participants in the life of the Warren Center during their fellowship year. Further information is available on the Warren Center’s website.

## THATCamp 2015

THATCamp 2015 will be held November 6-7 at the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise & Public Policy. THATCamp (which stands for The Humanities and Technology Camp) is an international program designed to promote interest in and to develop skills related to digital humanities.

This year’s featured speaker is Elonka Dunin, COO and studio director of Black Gate Games. A noted cryptographer, Dunin

was the first person to crack the PhreakNic Code. She is also co-founder and co-leader of a group of cryptographers who are currently working to crack a code on the famous Kryptos sculpture at CIA Headquarters.

Referred to as an “unconference” due to its flexible scheduling, THATCamp serves as a resource to those both within and outside of the academic community. A wide variety of people including faculty members, curators, librarians, graduate and undergraduate students, journalists, bloggers, and others use the knowledge they gain from THATCamp

to enhance their own projects. Examples of sessions might include: TEI (Text Encoding Initiative), digital archiving, video games, 3D modeling, Twitter, tools for beginners, securing funding for digital humanities projects, Omeka, and Neatline.

Hosted by the Warren Center, the Center for Second Language Studies, the Jean & Alexander Heard Libraries, and the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise & Public Policy, this event is free and open to the public; registration is required. For more information visit the Warren Center’s website.



# The Real Thing: Black and White Is the New Gray

Edward H. Friedman

“At the core of all well-founded belief lies belief that is unfounded.”  
—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*

Educators often describe their principal task as teaching students how to think critically, that is, how to analyze diverse materials, and how to understand, synthesize, appreciate, and determine the value and validity of the seemingly infinite quantity of facts that confront us. This is a complex venture, inflected by the lexicon, aims, and conventions of our respective disciplines. Most questions and issues raised require nuanced approaches that yield a variety of responses and projected solutions. Distinctions, differences, and debates, to a great extent, keep us in business, given that most answers can be deemed as partial or incomplete. Some searches endeavor to find the truth, or truths, whereas others underscore the elusive nature of truth. As renowned an authority as Aristotle distinguishes the objectivity of history from the subjectivity of poetry, thus legitimizing the presupposition that writing—historiography—can be objective. From classical antiquity, then, nonfiction has enjoyed a special status over fiction with regard to truthfulness. In one way or another, we are all seekers of truth, although the mechanisms of the pursuit may be radically divergent. Reading becomes a fundamental aspect of individual and collective inquiries, so, in essence, our instruction depends on communicating skills for reading. The skills include strategies and tools for exploring, deciphering, scrutinizing, hypothesizing, and reaching conclusions, from the tentative to the categorical. I would call this goal “reading between the lines,” yet there are signs all around us of the presence, and force, of those who prefer instead to subordinate this abstract space to the lines themselves, to the concept of literal meanings.

Certain people in high places, notably in the law, in politics, and in theology, affirm, quite regularly in momentous instances, that their interpretations of words are literal. These literalists accept the transparency of language, or, in the parlance of structural linguistics, the capability of signifiers to lead to unequivocal signifieds. Judgments made from lofty spheres can affect many people, and the basic premises of literalist methodologies can have decisive consequences. Aristotle (perhaps a bit ironically in light of his stand on history) and a number of his contemporaries and near-contemporaries were specialists in the art of rhetoric, a field that accentuates the weight and the elasticity of words, which can be used to create ornate and persuasive discourse. Dialogues and polemics

do not transpire in a vacuum. The rhetoricians anticipate, in their own way, the poststructuralists of the late twentieth century who emphasize the middle ground between signifier and signified, the site of mediation, of confusion, of acknowledgment of the inevitable markers of polysemy, or multiple meanings. Words can be ambiguous, perspective can change a story, tone can affect reader-response, and circumstances can fluctuate. In the ingenious “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” Jorge Luis Borges demonstrates that even if an author could rewrite Miguel de Cervantes’s narrative verbatim in another time and place, the resulting text would not be the same within its altered context. In metaphorical terms, pictures are transformed by new frames and framing devices. An ostensibly stable set of words can be shown to be unstable. Hayden White, in *Meta-history, Tropics of Discourse*, and other studies, dismantles the myth of objectivity by maintaining that historians, like writers of imaginative fiction, develop a form, or structure, for historiography. There is no natural plot dictated by events; historians construct systems of emplotment to give order to events and to select and prioritize some elements over others. Objectivity can be a desideratum, but it cannot be a reality. Still, the notion of objectivity has staying power, as does the related idea of literal meaning.

There is a brief anecdote in the fourteenth-century *Libro de buen amor* [Book of Good Love] by the Spanish writer Juan Ruiz, Archpriest of Hita, whose work has been compared with Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, in which representatives of Greece are reluctant to give credit to the Romans for their comprehension of profound matters of Church and State. The Romans must prove themselves worthy of sharing the laws of the more advanced culture. The Greeks agree to have a contest in which one man from each group will dispute a particular topic through signs. The Greeks choose a sage, while the Romans pick a ruffian whom they dress in elegant garb. The wise man from Greece offers commentary on theology, and he and his comrades are so satisfied with the responses of the Roman that they approve of the proposed collaboration. The Greek explains that he held up one finger to stress the existence of one God and that the Roman answered by holding up three fingers to symbolize the trinity. The Greek then showed the Roman his palm

held flat to indicate the supremacy of God, and the Roman made a fist to emphasize that God’s sovereignty extends to the entire world. This comprehension has been sufficient to warrant a victory. When asked about his replies, the Roman notes that the Greek threatened to poke out his eye, and he responded that he would poke his opponent’s eyes and teeth with two fingers and thumb. The Greek then intimated that he would slap the Roman’s face, and the Roman declared that he would follow that with a resounding punch. This allegory of the openness of signs is simple but brilliant, not only as an exemplum but as a microcosm of the *Libro de buen amor* as a whole. Juan Ruiz writes a type of miscellany on the adventures and misadventures of a priest who pursues a series of women. The rationale is based on negative exemplarity: this mode of behavior is precisely what one should not emulate. The pretext gives the author free rein to write a “book of bad love,” of ribald entertainment professing that it is a primer on admirable conduct. The episode is one case of many in which writers “say one thing and mean another” or leave readers confused (if not dazed) as the creative artists celebrate the intricacies and enigmas of language.

Words are, in short, “always already” opaque, and poets and writers of fiction have the opportunity to embellish and to foreground the perplexing nature of signs. In specific situations, authors may take advantage of the density of possible meanings in order to shield themselves from restrictions and censorship. In early modern Spain, for example, baroque sensibility aided the cause of self-protection. Convolutional language and elaborate conceptual bases allowed writers to expound their views and to put forth critique, be it subtly or covertly. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*—now exactly four-hundred years old, with 2015 as the anniversary year of Part 2—epitomizes the interplay, or dialectics, of art and reality. Its trajectory is bidirectional, moving from honoring the literary past to laying the groundwork for future narrative, and from referencing history to delineating a revisionist history. Cervantes challenges the reader at every turn. From chapter 1 of Part 1, and earlier in a prologue that fictionalizes the author and subverts traditional standards, irony builds upon irony. The narrator announces that the text constitutes the “true history” of *Don Quixote* as it undermines, again and again, the absoluteness of truth and the objectivity of history. The man who turns

himself into Don Quixote has become mad from his reading of chivalric romances, which he treats as true. The claim of veracity is repeatedly satirized and contradicted. At one point, with the knight errant in mid-battle, the narrator reveals that he cannot continue his account, for he has run out of information. He finds the manuscript of an Arab historian named Cide Hamete Benengeli, which he commissions to be translated by a Morisco. Something will have been lost in translation, to be sure, and the original is written by a Muslim, an enemy of the Spanish Christians, who characterized their foes as liars. Cervantes invites the consumer of fiction to turn inward and to observe its self-referentiality, and, simultaneously, to perceive of fiction as a periphrastic, or roundabout, depiction of reality. Cervantes was a masterful wordsmith, who recognized the range and the limits of language. He incorporated into *Don Quixote*, in a most impressively artful fashion, a consciousness of—and a respect for—the encompassing scope of words, for the inescapable gaps in writing and reading, and for the capacity of literature to reflect and deflect the commerce of the world.

Cervantes addresses *Don Quixote* to the “idle reader,” thereby highlighting in the opening words, a crosscurrent of irony. The “true history” bears examination as an investigation of historiography and of the relative posing as the absolute. When a devious writer, under the pseudonym of Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda, publishes a continuation of *Don Quixote* between Cervantes’s two parts, the “real” sequel becomes the paradoxical “true history,” or at least the true story. (The Spanish *historia* covers both.) Real life and art converge here and on innumerable stages, and the quintessential book about books has increasing junctures with the realities of the day, and beyond. *Don Quixote*, in sum, is about reading and writing, about word processing, about the impact of shifts in perspective, about techniques of storytelling, about the making and remaking of history, and about the intersection of literature and life. Its operative trope is irony, and its guiding principle is, arguably, that there is a distance between occurrence and expression. Perception involves the immediacy of experience, along with levels of reconfiguration and transferal. *Don Quixote* serves as a training manual for students of literature, history, psychology, criticism, and theory. It anticipates Russian formalism’s insistence that the recourses of art cannot be separated from ideology, poststructuralism’s deconstructive bent, and so on. The striking self-consciousness of *Don Quixote* does not inaugurate metafiction, but Cervantes intensifies the bond between process and product by providing a

dual path: the juxtaposition of the exploits of the anachronistic knight errant with the trials and tribulations of composition. In *Don Quixote*, metafiction never loses touch with reality or with an incipient narrative realism, although proportions and practices are adjusted to a “novel” brand of hybridity. The lessons for the reader come nonstop, and one of them has to do with the improbability of literal readings, a faith in which would seem to be quixotic, at best. Nonetheless, literalism has its proponents. Rhetoric—ancient, modern, and postmodern—together with discourse analysis, attention to the many categories of “spin,” and common sense, might suggest otherwise.

Writers, with poets at the top of the list, blend linguistic invention with messages. In the parlance of the Russian formalists of the early twentieth century, literary language enacts a defamiliarization wherein words must be deciphered and made newly familiar. This layering effect represents one extreme. The other would be straightforward language, a style of writing that strives for clarity, comprehensibility. Whether a writer aspires to transparency or its antithesis, absolute clarity of expression is most difficult to achieve, as is writing free of traces of an author’s intervention and personal mindset. Literature—poetry, narrative, drama—may add gradations of complexity, but, in writing as in life, nothing is ever simple. Fiction and nonfiction are hardly the same, but they each exhibit a point of view, or various points of view. As Hayden White—not to mention Cervantes, almost four centuries earlier and more eloquently—asserts, the historian and historiography are, like the dancer and the dance, and mixing metaphors, joined at the hip. The conversion of data into a historical narrative requires selection, selection requires omission, and, hence, opinions, judgments, and biases cannot be excluded as factors within the dynamic. Correspondingly, one cannot disregard the opinions, judgments, and biases of the reader, as well as the conditions under which reading takes place, that is, the mediating space of interpretation and analysis. Stated succinctly, if a bit exaggeratedly, writing and reading appear to conspire against the literal. A defense of this proposition is the act of translation, which, as Cervantes illustrates through parody, can be neither uniform nor perfectly accurate.

Wayne Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, differentiates between reliable and unreliable narrators. Poststructuralist narratologists might contend that there are degrees of unreliable narrators. In the short story “La noche boca arriba” [The Night Face-up] by Julio Cortázar, the protagonist is hospitalized after a motorcycle accident. He begins to have recurring dreams in which he is a Motec tribesman

chased by Aztec enemies in need of a sacrificial victim. At the end, the narrator modifies the description of events to reverse the temporal scheme: the present is the Aztec ritual, and the dream is the ordeal of a man on an “enormous metal insect.” The narrator has remarked that the supposed dreams were unusual, because they were sequential and because they contained smells. To make the transition, Cortázar switches from a narrator secure in what he is portraying to a narrator caught off-guard and in line with the mystified protagonist, now facing death. The adjustment is not entirely convincing, since the surprise is, if not illogical, irrefutably inconsistent with the details, and one would be hard-pressed to unearth a record of the *motecas* (as in *motocicleta*). The story hangs gloriously in limbo, with no rational solution and no compelling explanation of the transposition. It is as if Cortázar’s substitution of an unreliable narrator for a deceptively reliable narrator were an analogue of the blurred lines between dream and reality and between perception and misperception. “La noche boca arriba” seems to implore the reader to take nothing for granted, to beware of false clues, and to reanalyze every potential conclusion. Facts can change suddenly, without warning and without reason. For Booth, an unreliable narrator may attempt to mislead the reader or may misinform inadvertently. The same may be said of spin doctors, whose talking points tend to have predetermined intentions and ulterior motives. Their appeal to facts—and, by implication, to truth—is conspicuously dependent on rhetoric. Their agendas can be easy to discern, or not so easy. Literary analysis, criticism, and theory can prepare us to deal with the rhetoric of the so-called real world.

The kinds of questions inspired by literature are, perforce, dialogical, debatable, and never-ending. How do generations of readers interpret classic texts, and how do points of interest change over time? How can scholars keep writing and researching the works of Shakespeare and Cervantes? How do *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote* reflect early modern societies and ours? How can the briefest of micro-stories keep us busy for hours and perhaps elude comprehension? The answer to such questions and incalculable others might be, in a phrase, the flexibility of language, combined with the brilliance of creative energy. Conveyed in another manner, the answer might be the refusal of meaning to be literal. Historians (and metahistorians) have endorsed the “constructedness” of historical writing and an underlying rhetoric within historiography. Statements by politicians are among the most edifying samples of rhetoric at work, and they are surpassed by statements about those statements (metacom-

mentary). “The Republican response” and “the Democratic response” are unlikely to shatter one’s expectations or preconceptions. We hear what people say and write, and, more often than not, we hear what we want to hear, and editorialize at the slightest motivation. Our reading consists of “reading into” the material at hand, aligning words to our thought patterns. We can be influenced and persuaded by new ideas, but we cannot write ourselves out of the equation. We are living in a moment of massive public airing of views, precipitated by technology, which has facilitated access to the news, defined broadly (“all that’s fit to print” plus), and which has “virtually” (so as to avoid “literally”) made everyone a critic. A more subtle but no less contentious area of discussion and debate is the United States Supreme Court, where points of view and argumentation reach peaks of intricacy and erudition. Nine wise jurists read voluminous legal documents, hear myriad arguments, and make decisions, not infrequently by a 5-4 vote. The predispositions of the justices—what might be labeled

their reading habits—are well known. The members of the court are obviously competent readers and interpreters of the law, but they habitually agree to disagree, sometimes with vigor, especially in the posting of dissent. This openness of the law—and of language—justifies the judicial process, with courts, appellate courts, and supreme courts. Paradoxically, the justice who most prides himself on being a constitutional literalist may be the most adept at figurative language, and that somehow seems poetically just. I will remain silent on the subject of biblical hermeneutics, for religion is a case unto itself, not to be trifled with or tread upon without the utmost sensitivity.

Every discipline has its rules, standards, and paradigms, and interdisciplinary models increase the breadth of our knowledge and understanding. A concentration on literature permits us to see—and to try to see through—language as a link to art and life. Rhetoric lies at the foundation of discourse and of discourse analysis, and neo-rhetorical approaches to language complement exercises geared toward

the study of reading, speech, and writing. The most significant point is not the dichotomy of the literal versus the figurative, but resistance to the concept of a literal interpretation. Signs are all around us, begging for elucidation, clarification, and, on occasion, vindication. They are like puzzles to be solved, but they are prone to have missing pieces that must be managed when closure is doubtful. Meaning is evasive, but worth probing. Do not be put off by shades of gray. Questions can be more satisfying than answers. Literature seems to be sweeter and more useful by the minute. Do not fear reading between the lines. Think of it as the meat (or veggies) between two slices of bread. (And note that all language is not poetry.)

*Edward H. Friedman is Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of Spanish, Professor of Comparative Literature, and director of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities.*

## Warren Center to Co-Sponsor Panels at the 2015 Southern Festival of Books “Understanding Islam”

This year’s Southern Festival of Books, sponsored by Humanities Tennessee, will take place October 9-11 in downtown Nashville. Approximately 250 authors attend the Festival each year, from prominent national and regional authors, to debut novelists, poets, biographers, and children’s authors. Each author on the Festival’s program takes part in a session, either a solo reading or a panel discussion, which is followed by a book signing.

The Warren Center is co-sponsoring a series of speakers at the 2015 book festival who will be examining the topic “Understanding Islam.” The co-directors of the 2015-2016 Warren Center Sawyer Seminar, Professors Tony K. Stewart, Samira Sheikh, and David J. Wasserstein have been working closely with staff members at Humanities Tennessee to plan the series; members of the Fellows Program will serve as moderators for sessions on this topic at the book festival this fall. The 2015-2016 Warren Center Sawyer Seminar is entitled “When the Fringe Dwarfs the Center: Vernacular Islam beyond the Arab World.”



Speakers in the series “Understanding Islam” at the Festival will include Rahimeh Andalibian (*The Rose Hotel: A Memoir of Secrets, Love and Loss from Iran to America*), Karima Bennoune (*Your Fatwa Does Not Belong Here*), miriam cooke (*Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf*), Bruce Lawrence (*Who Is Allah*), Joseph Massad (*Islam in Liberalism*), Azar Nafisi (*The Republic of Imagination*), Paul Vasterling (Artistic Director & CEO of the Nashville Ballet to discuss the spring 2016 production of *Layla & Majnun*), and Rafia Zakaria (*The Upstairs Wife: An Intimate History of Pakistan*).

The Warren Center has a long history of successful partnerships with Humanities Tennessee. In recent years, we have co-sponsored themed tracks at the Southern Festival of Books on topics such as “Building Community in the 21st Century: Perspectives on Civility and Democracy”; “The Civil War and Emancipation: Conflict and Reckoning”; “Taking Our Pulse: Promises and Pitfalls of Modern Medicine”; and “Standing Together: The Humanities and the Experience of War.”



*Daniel McAuley, the 2014-2015 Visiting Graduate Student Fellow from Queen’s University, Belfast, and Janice Carruthers, Head of the School of Modern Languages at Queen’s University, Belfast, help unveil the Neil Shawcross prints of poets Michael Longley (left) and Seamus Heaney. These prints were gifts to the Warren Center from our colleagues at Queen’s.*



## 2015-2016 Warren Center Graduate Student Fellows

**Faith E. Barter**, the 2015-16 American Studies Fellow, is a doctoral candidate in English with an emphasis on the intersection of 19th-century U.S. African American literature and 19th-century U.S. legal history. Her dissertation, "Human Rites: Deciphering Legal and Literary Personhood, 1830-1860," examines this intersection by undertaking a literary history of antebellum slavery law in the United States. She pairs African American protest literature, autobiography, and fiction with contemporaneous legal texts to identify law and literature's shared project in shaping the definitions of human, person, and citizen. She argues that the antebellum rise of African American fiction is a direct response and challenge to the law of slavery. She practiced law at a global law firm prior to pursuing her Ph.D. in English.

**Michell Chresfield** is a doctoral candidate in history specializing in cultural and intellectual history. Her dissertation, "Problem and Promise: Scientific Experts and the 'Mixed-Blood,' 1870-1970," examines a century of scientific discourses surrounding the racial character of Indian remnants residing in the eastern United States. Her work explores the political and scientific scrutiny of these communities as the regimes of Jim Crow, eugenics, and the one-drop rule troubled the idea of a coherent set of rules for racial classification. Additionally, she excavates a long and complex history of "mixed-race" identity in the U.S., in the era before being bi- or multi-racial was a legitimate political and cultural stance. As such, her work opens up new avenues for understanding processes of racial formation and ideas of racial fluidity in modern America.

**Jonathan S. Coley** is a doctoral candidate in sociology. His dissertation, "Varieties of Activism: Pathways of Participation among LGBT Religious Activists," traces the biographical trajectories of students working to make Christian colleges and universities more inclusive of LGBT communities. He shows that students engaged in LGBT activism come from diverse backgrounds - not only "activist households," but also conservative and apolitical upbringings. He also maps out the range of LGBT activist groups in which students participate, including "direct action groups" that employ protest tactics to transform university policies, "educational groups" that arrange informational events in an effort to open up campus dialogue, and "solidarity groups" that focus on providing a safe space for their participants.

**Alexander I. Jacobs**, the 2015-16 George J. Graham, Jr. Fellow, is a doctoral candidate in history. His dissertation, "Enlightenment Projects: The Age of Reason and the Politics of Disenchantment in Postwar American Thought," examines the efforts of a group of postwar American intellectuals to fuse social democratic politics with "counter-enlightenment" philosophy. Drawing on the published and unpublished writings of historians, philosophers, and journalists, he demonstrates that during the middle decades of the twentieth century, a range of American thinkers developed a defense of democracy and the welfare state that rejected traditional liberal commitments to reason, science, and progress. He argues that these efforts to construct a viable Left Conservative alternative to liberalism failed, and their failure helps illuminate why the American experiment with social democracy eroded and then collapsed after the 1960s.

**Michelle O'Loughlin**, an interdisciplinary doctoral candidate whose research spans the Schools of Psychology and Modern Languages, is the Warren Center's Visiting Graduate Student Fellow from Queen's University, Belfast. Her thesis project, "A Cognitive Approach to Audio Description," knits together elements from cognitive science and translation in order to consider an interdisciplinary approach to evaluating and developing practices surrounding audio description for television and cinema audiences. Realizing that the specificities of audio describing and thus translating not solely between languages but between sensory modalities was going to require some unorthodox research methods, she began consulting with the psychology department in order to utilize empirical and objective methods that have evolved alongside research and development in electroencephalography (EEG). This method geared her research towards approaching the practice and theory of audio description from a cognitive perspective, as a means to gain new insights into the mind and needs of the audio description consumer.

**Petal K. Samuel**, the 2015-16 Elizabeth E. Fleming Fellow, is a doctoral candidate in English. Her dissertation, "Timing to Descant: Sonic Temporalities of Slavery in Caribbean and U.S. American Literatures," examines the ways in which unlikely rhetorical alliances between contemporary Caribbean women writers and U.S. American gothic writers have stood in contrast to U.S. national

discourses of "progress." It argues that in works that depict slavery and its aftermaths, these writers use sound as a vehicle for marking the resilience of slavery's ongoing influence on contemporary institutions. By turning to logics of sound these works make a specifically temporal critique, rejecting notions of linear, progressive national time in favor of models such as circularity (through motifs of echo) and disjuncture (through motifs of skipping and stalling). By understanding these narratives of slavery as interrupting timelines of progress, these writers envision slavery not as a singular set of events confined in time, but as a continuous, evolving, and long-term phenomenon.

**Sandra D. Skene** is a doctoral candidate in philosophy. Her dissertation, "Transatlantic Narratives on Overcoming Epistemic Injustice: On the Roles of Imagination and Remembrance in the Formation of Epistemic Agency," looks to the work of Audre Lorde, Maria Lugones, and Hannah Arendt for insights into unique approaches to combatting the harm of being prejudicially excluded from knowledge-making practices. It challenges the widespread intuition that responsibility for repairing epistemic injustice lies almost exclusively in the hands of those perpetrating the harm. Arguing instead that a thoroughly contextualized and pluralistic approach to the problem reveals multiple hermeneutical resources from within which socio-economically marginalized epistemic agents can draw the social meanings they need to make sense of their lives, she shows that epistemic agency can exist even under conditions of oppression.

**Steven Wenz**, the 2015-16 Joe and Mary Harper Fellow, is a doctoral candidate in Spanish and Portuguese. His dissertation "National Identity in Contemporary Argentine Culture," focuses on the representation of national identity in contemporary Argentine culture. He studies the extent to which Argentina, long considered a prosperous and "white" European outpost in South America, has taken steps toward re-imagining its national community since the financial and political crisis of 2001. The topics that he explores include the depiction of the past in Argentine literature, the connections between nationalism and soccer in television productions, the role of Afro-Argentines in national society, and the portrayal of the indigenous peoples of northwestern Argentina in tourism brochures and government publications.

## Weaver Begins Postdoctoral Fellowship at Queen's University, Belfast

As part of the Warren Center's continued partnership with Queen's University in Belfast, Brendan Weaver will be a 2015-2016 Visiting Postdoctoral Fellow at their Institute for Collaborative Research in the Humanities. A recent Ph.D. graduate from the Vanderbilt Anthropology Department and a member of the 2014-2015 Warren Center Graduate Student Fellows Program, Weaver



*Brendan Weaver*

will continue his archaeological and ethno-historical research on the lived experience of 17th- and 18th- century enslaved Afro-Andean laborers on Jesuit wine estates in coastal Peru.

"While in residence at the Institute, I plan to develop a series of publications based on this research in concert with specialists who have collaborated with my research project, the Haciendas of Nasca Archaeological Project (PAHN)," Weaver said. "I also anticipate expanding and revising my book project 'Fruit of the Vine, Work of Human Hands': An Archaeology and Ethnohistory of Slavery at the Jesuit Vineyards of Nasca, Peru.' From my experience at the Robert Penn Warren Center

for the Humanities, I have learned the value of interdisciplinary perspectives and collaboration, and I look forward to collaborative exchange with the scholarly community at Queen's."

Last year's postdoctoral fellow was Aubrey Porterfield. In addition to being able to pursue research related to her recent Ph.D. in English, Porterfield developed a better understanding of how interdisciplinary connections can impact a scholar's work.

"As a staff member at the Institute for Collaborative Research in the Humanities, I have gained a deeper appreciation for the way that scholarly partnerships across disciplines can produce theories and methodologies that enhance, and sometimes challenge, current knowledge," Porterfield said. "For example, I organized a reading group on the theme of sensory perception, which brought together faculty and graduate students from film studies, cognitive psychology, literature, and architecture. Though our disciplines conceived of sensory phenomena in very different ways, we were all interested in considering and questioning the senses as a locus of knowledge-production. These discussions led me to incorporate essays from architectural theorists on the phenomenology of place into my own research on literary representations of raced and gendered sensory perception."

For the past several years, Queen's University has sent one of their top doctoral students

to participate in the Warren Center's Graduate Student Fellows Program. This year's visiting Graduate Student Fellow at the Warren Center is Michelle O'Loughlin. She is an interdisciplinary doctoral candidate whose research currently spans the schools of Psychology and Modern Languages and will be completing her dissertation entitled "A Cognitive Approach to Audio Description."

Created in 2012, the Institute for Collaborative Research in the Humanities at Queen's is directed by John Thompson, Professor of English. The Institute provides strategic leadership at Queen's to support and enhance world-class interdisciplinary research in the humanities at all levels, from postgraduate training and early career research to the development of large-scale collaborative research projects. It encourages and promotes cross-school, cross-faculty and inter-institutional collaboration that leads to high-quality research outputs with significant impact on society.

Queen's University is one of Vanderbilt University's strategic international partners and the two universities have a very successful history of collaboration. Support for this 2015-2016 Postdoctoral Fellowship is provided by the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities with assistance from the Vanderbilt International Office.



*Aubrey Porterfield*

## HASTAC Scholars Present at Annual Conference

by *Dan Fang*

In May 2015, representatives of Vanderbilt's thriving HASTAC community presented their research at the annual HASTAC Conference. HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory) is an international alliance comprised of both academics and non-academics who are all dedicated to developing digital forms of scholarship. Digital humanities scholars from Vanderbilt were part of two panels at the conference, one entitled "Visualizing DH: Spatial Analysis and Representations," and the other "Social Praxis and the Digital Archive."

Presenting in the panel on "Visualizing DH" were VU HASTAC Scholars Megan Myers (Spanish and Portuguese, sponsored

by Humanities Tennessee), Timothy Foster (Spanish and Portuguese, sponsored by the Center for Second Language Studies), Benjamin Shapiro (teaching and learning, Peabody College, sponsored by the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy), and Dan Fang (English, sponsored by the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities). The panelists also presented the work of Emily Burchfield (civil and environmental engineering, sponsored by the School of Engineering) who was unable to attend. Each of the HASTAC Scholars presented examples of how to visualize their work in the digital humanities using tools such as GeoJSON and Wordle clouds.

The second panel featuring Vanderbilt representatives, "Social Praxis and the Digital Archive," included Todd Hughes (Director of

Instructional Technologies at the Center for Second Language Studies) and Myers. Joining them were faculty members from Vanderbilt University's international partner, Queen's University, Belfast: Federico Pagello, Michael Pierse, and Owen Felton, all of whom are affiliated with the Institute for Collaborative Research in the Humanities at Queen's.

Both panels were well received at the conference, inspiring many questions and conversations. For more information about the conference search Twitter with #hastac2015.

*Dan Fang was the 2014-2015 HASTAC Scholar at the Warren Center. She recently completed her Ph.D. in English.*



## 2015-2016 Andrew W. Mellon John E. Sawyer Seminar Fellows

**Dianna Bell** is Mellon Assistant Professor of Religious Studies. She studies the history and anthropology of indigenous religions and Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa with a focus on contemporary Mali. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork in southern Mali, her current book project explores how Malians use the concept of *baraji*, which translates into English as “divine recompense” or “merit,” as a framework for understanding proper religious practice. In order to reveal the variable ways that people earn *baraji* as they move through their life course, she has collected the life history of an elderly Fula man with a focus on his attainment of *baraji* in order to illustrate how the acquisition of *baraji* changes drastically with age and circumstance. She also studies links between religion and ecology and is currently researching the role of ritual during the Sahelian famine.

**Daniel A. Birchok** is Visiting Assistant Professor in Anthropology and the 2015-2016 William S. Vaughn Visiting Fellow at the Warren Center. He is an anthropologist and historian of modern Southeast Asian religion. His primary research focuses on the role of Islamic ritual and narrative as a mode of public memory in Indonesia since the late nineteenth century. While at the Warren Center he will be revising his book manuscript, “The Pasts of Islam: Memory, Locality, and Ritual in an Indonesian Province,” which is a historical ethnography of the descendants of a nineteenth-century Islamic saint buried in the Indonesian province of Aceh.

**Julia Phillips Cohen** is Associate Professor in the Program in Jewish Studies and the Department of History. She is the author of *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford University Press, 2014), and (together with Sarah Abrevaya Stein) co-editor of *Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History, 1700-1950* (Stanford University Press, 2014). She is currently writing a book on Ottoman Jews’ engagement in the Oriental goods trade. Material from this new project appears in her recent article “Oriental by Design: Ottoman Jews, Imperial Style, and the Performance of Heritage,” *American Historical Review* 119:2 (April 2014).

**Ashish Koul** is a doctoral candidate in history. She studies modern South Asian history, with a focus on the history of politics, kinship and religion in early twentieth-century India. Her dissertation, provisionally entitled “Kinship and Politics in Colonial India: A History of

the Arains, 1890s-1940s,” looks at the intersections of kin-based identity and political expression in the province of Punjab in British India. Focusing on the Punjabi community of Arains, this project traces the construction, dissemination, and political mobilization of a new Arain identity during the early decades of the twentieth century. This newly-minted selfhood challenged commonly-held notions about Arains’ low socio-economic status and sought to recast them as a high-status, progressive, reform-minded, and educated Muslim community of India. The centrality of religious identity in the construction of this new Arain self is the basis of this project’s interest in the relationship between the sources of Arains’ (universal) Islamic identity and their (local) non-Islamic identity.

**Riyaz Latif** is Mellon Assistant Professor in the Department of History of Art whose work centers on visual expression stemming from composite Islamic cultural interactions in the western Mediterranean rim, and the dissemination of visual sensibilities through trade and travel in the premodern Islamic world. His book manuscript in preparation, “Ornate Visions of Knowledge and Power: Formation of Marinid Madrasas in Maghrib al-Aqsa,” addresses issues related to the visual formation of these fourteenth-century institutions. He has also written about the Marinid necropolis of the Chella in Rabat, Morocco, and on the historical imagining of the Great Mosque of Cordoba.

**Richard McGregor** is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Islamic Studies. His primary field of research is medieval Egypt and Syria, with a focus on intellectual history, visual culture, and Sufism. He is the author of *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt* (SUNY, 2004), a study of the evolution of religious authority among mystics of medieval Cairo. He is co-editor of two collected volumes on Egyptian Sufism, as well as a translation of a tenth-century Iraqi philosophical fable, *The Case of Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn* (OUP, 2014). His current book project, “Islam and the Object of Religion” is a study of religious practice centered on objects, aesthetics, and material culture.

**William Murrell** is a doctoral candidate in history whose research focuses on Muslim-Christian relations in the medieval Mediterranean. His dissertation, “Translation and Toleration: Dragomans, Muslims, and Crusaders,” examines the role of translators as linguistic and

cultural intermediaries between Muslims and Latin Christians in the crusader period. By focusing on translators, this project will explore the intersection of language, culture, and religion and highlights the often overlooked historical reality that most interreligious contact in the medieval Mediterranean—in war and in peacetime—required linguistic mediation. This project is an attempt to retell the story of the crusades through the eyes of those often invisible linguistic intermediaries, as they facilitated contact between people of different faiths who also spoke different languages.

**Moses E. Ochonu** is Professor of African History. He is the author of three books; most recently, *Africa in Fragments: Essays on Nigeria, Africa, and Global Africanity* (New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2014) and *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Indiana University Press, 2014). He is currently working on a book project dealing with a unique form of colonial patronage which saw British colonial authorities sponsor Northern Nigerian emirs and other Muslim aristocrats to London and other metropolitan destinations. Tentatively titled, “Writing the Metropole: Nigerian Muslim Perspectives on Imperial Britain,” the project focuses on the evolution of this imperial travel into self-sponsored political pilgrimages and on the narratives the travelers produced.

**Samira Sheikh** is Associate Professor of History and Affiliated Faculty in the Asian Studies Program. Her research interests include politics and religion in South Asia from 1200-1950, early modern trade, and early Indian maps. She is the author of *Forging a Region: Sultans, Traders, and Pilgrims in Gujarat, 1200-1500* (Oxford India, 2010) and co-editor of *An Anthology of Ismaili Literature: A Shi'i Vision of Islam* (I.B. Tauris and the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2008). She is currently working on a book on Mughal approaches to non-Muslims set against the backdrop of the trade connections of Muslim communities and polities in the Indian Ocean.

**Tony K. Stewart** is Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Chair in Humanities, Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, Professor of Asian Studies, and Professor of the History of Religions in the Graduate Department of Religion. He is the author of *The Final Word: The Caitanya Caritamṛta and the Grammar of Religious Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2010) and *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs: Tales of Mad Adventure in Old Bengal*

(Oxford University Press, 2004). A specialist in Hindu-Muslim encounter in the premodern period, he is presently working on a monograph tentatively titled “Romance of the Pirs: Fictive Discourse in Early Modern Bengali Sufism.”

**Anand Vivek Taneja** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies. His research and teaching interests include the anthropology of religion, historical and contemporary Islam and inter-faith relations in South Asia, everyday life and post-colonial urbanism, Urdu literature, and Bombay cinema. His peer-reviewed articles have been pub-

lished in the *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory and Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. His other writings have appeared in *Seminar*, *The Sarai Reader*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, *The Indian Quarterly*, and on the blogs *Chapati Mystery* and *Kafila*. He is currently working on a book on time, Islam, and enchantment in the medieval ruins of Delhi.

**David J. Wasserstein** is Professor of History and Eugene Greener, Jr. Professor of Jewish Studies. He is a scholar of medieval Islamic and Jewish history. Among his books are *The*

*Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings, Politics and Society in Islamic Spain, 1002-1086* (Princeton University Press, 1985) and *The Legend of the Septuagint, From Classical Antiquity to Today* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) which he co-wrote with his late father, Abraham Wasserstein. He is also the editor of numerous books, including *Daghestan and the World of Islam* (Helsinki, 2006), which he edited with M. Gammer, and *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge, 2009), which he co-edited with H.M. Cotton, R.G. Hoyland, and J.J. Price.

## 2015/2016 Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities Seminars

*The following is a list of seminars and reading groups that will be hosted by the Warren Center in the fall semester. For more detailed information please contact the seminar coordinators or the Warren Center.*

**18th-19th-Century Colloquium:** The colloquium brings together faculty, graduate students, and visiting scholars to explore ground-breaking scholarship on the arts, cultures, and histories of the 18th- and 19th-centuries. While loosely focused around British culture, the group also invites scholars from other linguistic and geographic fields to share work and join in the discussion. Seminar Coordinators: Rachel Teukolsky (English) [rachel.teukolsky@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:rachel.teukolsky@vanderbilt.edu) and Scott Juengel (English) [scott.j.juengel@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:scott.j.juengel@vanderbilt.edu).

**Brazilian Studies Reading Group:** In its third edition, the Brazilian Studies Reading Group will focus on two inter-related topics: diversity and development. Monthly meetings consist of discussions among attendees and invited speakers based upon pre-circulated papers that reflect current research related to the topic. Guests come from a variety of disciplines, including—but not limited to—history, anthropology, political science, literature, Latin American studies, international education policy and management, and African diaspora studies. To be on the mailing list and receive papers, contact one of the co-coordinators: Fernanda Bretones (history) [f.bretones@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:f.bretones@vanderbilt.edu), Laura Sellers (political science) [laura.m.sellers@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:laura.m.sellers@vanderbilt.edu), or Steve Wenz (Spanish and Portuguese) [steven.b.wenz@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:steven.b.wenz@vanderbilt.edu).

**Circum-Atlantic Studies Seminar:** This group reads and treats scholarship that is interdisciplinary in nature, focuses on at least two of the following regions – Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, and

North America – and treats some aspect of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, and/or postcolonialism. Seminar coordinators: Celso Castilho (history) [celso.t.castilho@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:celso.t.castilho@vanderbilt.edu) and Jane Landers (history) [jane.landiers@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:jane.landiers@vanderbilt.edu).

**The Contemporary in Theory:** Faculty and graduate students from different disciplines and methodological backgrounds will collaborate to foster innovative approaches to the contemporary. Areas of inquiry include global capitalism, the end of ideology, the development of media and technology, and subsequent questions about the definitions and boundaries of the human. The seminar will focus on Lydia H. Liu’s *The Freudian Robot* as well as a number of related works. In the fall, participants will discuss related readings and in the spring the focus will turn to the work of invited speakers and Vanderbilt participants. Seminar organizers: Ben Tran (Asian Studies) [ben.tran@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:ben.tran@vanderbilt.edu) and Haerin Shin (English) [haerin.shin@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:haerin.shin@vanderbilt.edu).

**Derrida’s The Beast and the Sovereign Volumes I & II:** This seminar invites scholars from across the university to a reading of Jacques Derrida’s final lectures, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Vols. I and II. The seminar will be approaching the concepts of sovereignty and animality through the critical lenses of political theory, law, and posthumanism. The seminar will also invite metadisciplinary reflection as participants attempt to navigate and explore the intersections of philosophy, literary studies, political theory, and the legacies of deconstruction and of Derrida himself.

Co-coordinators: Shelby Johnson (English) [shelby.l.johnson@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:shelby.l.johnson@vanderbilt.edu), Paulo Martinez (philosophy) [paulo.g.martinez@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:paulo.g.martinez@vanderbilt.edu), and Stephanie Straub (English) [s.m.straub@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:s.m.straub@vanderbilt.edu).

**Digital Humanities Discussion Group:** The Digital Humanities seminar brings together colleagues from across the university who are interested in issues related to this area of study. The seminar participants will explore theories, practices, and methodologies of DH and explore ways to best support this type of work on our campus. Seminar coordinators: (Lynn Ramey (French) *on leave*, Todd Hughes (Center for Second Language Studies) [todd.hughes@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:todd.hughes@vanderbilt.edu), and Mona Frederick (Warren Center) [mona.frederick@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:mona.frederick@vanderbilt.edu).

**Environmental Humanities:** This working group brings together faculty and graduate students in the humanities and creative arts, the social sciences, the natural sciences, engineering, and law to study and forge robust interdisciplinary approaches to ecological issues. Through shared readings and research as well as collaborative projects, the group will explore the conjunctions and conflicts between scientific, social, cultural, creative, philosophical, political, and legal understandings of and engagement with the environment. We seek to foster new models for how humanistic inquiry can shape ecological questions, both inside and outside of the humanities, as well as participate in public discourse about urgent environmental problems. The seminar will meet monthly.

Seminar Coordinators: Catherine Molineux (history) *catherine.a.molineux@vanderbilt.edu* and Teresa Goddu (English) *teresa.a.goddu@vanderbilt.edu*.

**Film Theory & Visual Culture Seminar:**

This seminar aims to foster dialogue among faculty and graduate students across campus working in film, visual culture, art history, literature, and cultural studies interested in theories of the image, philosophies of perception, aesthetic and critical theory, media histories, and the history of vision. The group will meet monthly to discuss readings, share work, and engage the research of invited scholars. Seminar coordinators: Jennifer Fay (Film Studies and English) *jennifer.m.fay@vanderbilt.edu*, James McFarland (German) *james.mcfarland@vanderbilt.edu*, and Lutz Koepnick (German, cinema and media arts) *lutz.koepnick@vanderbilt.edu*.

**Gender and Sexualities Seminar:** This seminar provides an interdisciplinary forum for the development of critical perspectives on gender and sexuality. The seminar examines how gender and sexuality shape human experience within and across cultures, in different time periods, and as part of social practice. Participants will choose the format with an aim toward balancing new scholarship by graduate students and established scholars, as well as exploring topics of particular interest to the group. Seminar coordinator: Katherine Crawford (women's and gender studies) *katherine.b.crawford@vanderbilt.edu*.

**Group for Pre-modern Cultural Studies:**

The purpose of the group is to serve as a forum for those with interests in pre-modern studies, including not only history but language and literature, chiefly, though not exclusively, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, as well as music, art, and culture. The group meets monthly to discuss ongoing research by a faculty member, recent publications in the field, or the work of a visiting scholar. Seminar coordinator: Bill Caferro (history) *william.p.caferro@vanderbilt.edu*, Samira Sheikh (history) *samira.sheikh@vanderbilt.edu*, and Deann Armstrong (English) *deann.v.armstrong@vanderbilt.edu*.

**Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life:**

This group provides opportunities for exchange among faculty members and graduate students who are interested in or who are currently involved in projects that engage public scholarship. Vanderbilt is a member of the national organization, "Imagining America," a consortium of colleges and

universities committed to public scholarship in the arts, humanities, and design. Seminar coordinators: Mona Frederick (Warren Center) *mona.frederick@vanderbilt.edu* and Joe Bandy (Center for Teaching, sociology) *joe.bandy@vanderbilt.edu*.

**Literature and Law Seminar:** This reading group will meet to discuss current approaches, new challenges, and new possibilities that are offered to legal and literary scholars when they use insights from both fields to illuminate their work. The seminar welcomes anyone interested in the many topics now addressed in this field, including the use of obscenity laws to regulate creative work, the representation of law in literature, law as literature, the application of literary methods to legal texts, the challenges of constructing "characters" appropriate to literary and legal settings, and the revitalization of law through reference to humanistic texts and approaches. Seminar coordinators: Robert Barsky (French and Italian) *robert.barsky@vanderbilt.edu*, and Daniel Gervais (law) *daniel.gervais@vanderbilt.edu*.

**Literature, Medicine and Science Seminar:**

This group will consider how literature mediates narratives of medicine and science. Exploring the intersections of literature, medicine, and science, the seminar will trace the relationships between these intellectual cultures across disciplines. Meeting once a month, the participants will pair non-literary texts with fiction in order to trace dialogues between these traditionally disparate fields, combating the stereotype of a two-culture split between literature and medicine. Topics to be covered include narrative medicine, medicine and visual culture, (bio)ethics, narrative genetics, and speculative fiction and science, among others. Seminar participants will be encouraged to incorporate their own work into the discussion. Co-coordinators: Lauren Mitchell (English) *lauren.mitchell@vanderbilt.edu* and Wietske Smeele (English) *wietske.m.smeele@vanderbilt.edu*.

**Material Cultures Seminar:** This seminar focuses on the dynamics between objects and people. Because the study of objects is relevant to every discipline and area of study, every medium and historical period—including conceptions of the future—this seminar will appeal to faculty and graduate students across the College of Arts and Science and the university more widely. Participants will read and discuss key theoretical texts and case studies, and share their own research. Seminar coordinators: Mireille Lee (history of art and classical studies) *mireille.lee@vander-*

*bilt.edu* and Richard McGregor (religion) *richard.j.mcgregor@vanderbilt.edu*.

**Mexican Studies Seminar:** The goal of this group is to raise the profile of research related to Mexico on the Vanderbilt campus and support members' individual scholarly endeavors regarding this important nation bordering the United States. The group brings together faculty and graduate students from history, political science, literature, sociology, art, anthropology, music, and Latin American studies. At monthly meetings the group will discuss work-in-progress authored by members and invited scholars from beyond Vanderbilt. Seminar coordinators: Helena Simonett (Latin American Studies) *helena.simonett@vanderbilt.edu* and Edward Wright-Rios (history) *edward.wright-rios@vanderbilt.edu*.

**Music and Justice Seminar:** This seminar examines the intersection of music and justice from both a historical and modern lens. Some key themes of the seminar are music as a source of inspiration and strength for social movements, music as a window into the lives of individuals and groups engaged in political or social struggle, and the production and performance of music as itself a site of labor struggle and contestation. The seminar readings and films will take the participants from the cotton fields of the antebellum South and the docks worked by longshoremen in the Pacific Northwest to Belfast's punk scene and South Africa's pirated Americana folk recordings. The group will listen to recordings made in churches and activist spaces across the United States, as well as listen to live music together in Nashville. The seminar will also feature a running playlist created by seminar conveners and will conclude with a collaborative playlist built by seminar participants. Co-coordinators: Rachel Skaggs (sociology) *rachel.skaggs@vanderbilt.edu* and Anthony C. Siracusa (history) *anthony.c.siracusa.iii@vanderbilt.edu*.

**Science Studies Seminar:** This seminar brings together members of the Vanderbilt community with interests in the humanistic and social studies of science and technology. Activities include sharing work-in-progress, reading recent publications in the field, and hosting invited speakers. Faculty members and graduate students from across the university are welcome. Seminar coordinators: Ole Molvig (history) *ole.molvig@vanderbilt.edu*, and Alistair Sponzel (history) *alistair.sponzel@vanderbilt.edu*.



*Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities*

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*Belfast Castle. Photo by Bronte Lovelock.*

## Vanderbilt University and Queen's University, Belfast, Partner for a Maymester Course

Vanderbilt and Queen's Universities partnered for an undergraduate 2015 Maymester course that was a comparative study of the civil rights movements in Northern Ireland and the American South, principally in the 1950s and 1960s. Taught by Vanderbilt faculty members Vanessa Beasley (communication studies) and Daniel Cornfield (sociology) along with Queen's faculty members Peter Gray (history) and Catherine Clinton (history), the class, which met for two weeks on the Vanderbilt campus and two weeks on the Queen's campus, included students from both universities.



*Nashville Pedestrian Bridge. Photo by Jacqueline Scott.*



*16th Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, Al. Photo by Vanessa Beasley.*

### THE ROBERT PENN WARREN CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES

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**For a listing of Warren Center programs and activities, please contact the above address or visit our website at [www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw\\_center](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw_center).**

#### Statement of Purpose

Established under the sponsorship of the College of Arts and Science in 1987 and named the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities in 1989 in honor of Robert Penn Warren, Vanderbilt alumnus class of 1925, the Center promotes interdisciplinary research and study in the humanities, social sciences, and, when appropriate, natural sciences. Members of the Vanderbilt community representing a wide variety of specializations take part in the Warren Center's programs, which are designed to intensify and increase interdisciplinary discussion of academic, social, and cultural issues.

*Photos: Vanessa Beasley, Mona Frederick, Bronte Lovelock, John Russel, Jacqueline Scott*

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