

GENERATING INNOVATIVE QUESTIONS FOR CLASSICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY

Cornell's Society for the Humanities

Located in the former mansion of A. D. White, the Society for the Humanities has long provided humanists at Cornell with a space for intellectual exchange transcending departmental and disciplinary boundaries. Cornell President Jeffrey S. Lehman's recent call for the reassessment of Cornell's "revolutionary" intellectual traditions provides the opportunity to remember that Cornell's Society for the Humanities is one of the oldest centers of its kind in the country. It was founded in 1965, by the eminent philosopher, Max Black, in the belief that the most innovative questions for any discipline could be generated in the process of explaining itself to others.

By contrast, Yale's Whitney Humanities Center was not founded until 1981, and the Harvard Humanities Center was established in 1984. Princeton's Andlinger Center for the Humanities, opened in 2004, is indicative of a current trend toward establishing such centers in major universities around the country. It is not surprising that Cornell, at its inception, proposed a revolutionary combination of classical and technological curricula and led the way in making interdisciplinary work in the humanities an institutional priority.

The Society has always played a dual role at Cornell. It is a research institute, housing 12–13 full-time fellows who meet for weekly colloquia and, for the duration of their time there, pursue writing and research unencumbered by routine institutional obligations. Society fellows include both Cornell faculty and visiting scholars from other institutions, selected through a rigorous review process. Cornell's María Antonia Garcés, for example, won the Modern Language Association's prestigious James Russell Lowell Award for 2004 for her book, *Cervantes in Algiers*, completed while a fellow at the Society. Literary critic Renee Wellek, Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, and feminist theorists Laura Mulvey and Judith Butler are but a few distinguished humanists who have devoted intensive time to their writing at the Society.

In addition to its fellows program, the Society sponsors a panoply of intellectual and cultural events throughout the academic year. The elegant Victorian mansion hosts conferences, workshops, public lectures, poetry readings, and concerts,

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Dede Hatch

María Antonia Garcés

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Gail Holst-Warhaft, Society fellow, 2004/05



(l. to r.) Brett de Bary, director, Society for the Humanities; Helen Petrovsky, Russian Academy of Sciences, Society fellow 2004-05; John Whitman, Linguistics, Cornell



(l. to r.) Jan Parker, Classics, University of Cambridge, chair of the Humanities Higher Education Research Group; Gail Holst-Warhaft, Classics/Comparative Literature, Cornell, Society fellow 2004-05; Catherine Porter, French, SUNY Cortland, Society fellow 2004-05; Martin Winkler, Classics, George Mason University, Society fellow 2004-05

new initiatives that began as informal conversations at the A.D. White House include the society's annual "humanism at the crossroads" colloquium, cosponsored with faculty from Weill Cornell Medical College.

often followed by lively receptions. From atop its knoll at the center of the campus, the A. D. White House acts as the hub of Cornell's broader community of humanists, a crossroads where networking is done, ideas exchanged, and collaborative projects hatched. New initiatives that began as informal conversations at A. D. White House include the Society's annual "Humanism at the Crossroads" colloquium, cosponsored with faculty from Weill Cornell Medical College; readings by dissident intellectuals cosponsored with the Ithaca City of Asylum project; and a series of conferences on "Translation" that have been cohosted, over the past two years, by Cornell and Cambridge University in England.

Also distinctive to Cornell's Society for the Humanities is the tradition of defining a focal theme for each year's collaborative work. These themes may be explicitly metadisciplinary or may pinpoint topical sites of debate and breaking trends in the humanities. While most humanities centers simply accept applications from interested scholars, Cornell's Society has long held itself to a more demanding vision of interdisciplinary exchange. It has believed insistently that the effort of specialists to define a common problem and articulate a common ground for debate (with all the questioning of one's own assumptions this implies) is essential to the breakthroughs that drive fields forward.

In defining a yearly focal theme, Cornell's Society has sought to play a leading role in humanistic inquiry, boldly opening spaces for radical and challenging work. Jonathan Culler, English, Society director for much of the 1980s, is a renowned American interpreter of structuralist and poststructuralist thought. He and other Society fellows produced a series of influential books in this area during his directorship. Dominick LaCapra, History/Humanistic Studies, who succeeded Culler in the 1990s, made the Society a leading center for work on historiography, probing the profound intellectual and ethical implications of the Holocaust for late twentieth-century thought. Current director, Brett de Bary, Asian Studies/Comparative Literature, is a specialist in Japanese literature who has urged humanists to take up the task of redefining the very meaning of humanistic inquiry in the twenty-first century—a century which is witnessing both the proliferation of information technologies beyond the

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CU



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The Society's 2004-05 focal theme is Translation. By situating the humanistic task of meaning-making at sites of increasingly complex linguistic, cultural, and technological overlap, the theme calls for reflection on precisely this situation. Translation, indeed, is an apt metaphor for the process of interdisciplinary exchange itself. A rich feast is ahead with the year's activities. They will include bilingual public poetry readings of the work of Arab poet Adonis, Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco, and others; a keynote lecture on "Translation and the Art of Loss" by distinguished translator John Felstiner; a conference on Jewish, Muslim, and Christian cultures of medieval Spain; and an extended celebration of the 500-year anniversary and newly released translation of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.

Brett de Bary
Asian Studies and Comparative Literature

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Society for the Humanities



Brett de Bary (l.) and Jan Parker (r.) Cambridge University

For more information:



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Helen Petrovsky (l.) and Aicha Rahmouni (r.) Near Eastern Studies, Cornell, Society fellow, fall 2004



Reception for incoming fellows: Johanna Kramer (second from right) Mellon graduate student fellow, Medieval Studies, Cornell, with reception guests



Lieba Faier (l.) Mellon postdoctorate fellow, 2004-05, Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies; Sherry Martin (r.) Government/Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies; guest (c.)