English departments are eclectic places these days. As a faculty, our scholarship and teaching center on reading and writing a wide variety of texts. Our investigations contribute to deeper understandings of literary and cultural texts, to the writing of fiction and poetry, and to knowing more about how language and rhetoric work in settings in and out of the academy. This year the newsletter editors asked faculty who wish to contribute to write a little about their own sense of the directions the profession is currently taking. Some responded by talking about their own work and their teaching, especially their teaching of graduate students who set the scholarly and pedagogical paths for the future. Others wrote about their own fields and what they understand as continuing traditions and emerging directions in them. Here are their responses.

BOB ABRAMS

One way to answer your question—“What's up in literary and cultural studies these days?—is to take a look at the sorts of dissertations that we're directing in the Department. In my case, they span an interesting gamut.

These include:

1. an interdisciplinary study, at the intersection of cartography, descriptions of colonial landscape, feminism, and nineteenth-century medicine in which tropes and paradigms informing the literature of exploration and travel entail modes of would-be mastery and power which reemerge in medical literature claiming to “map the vagina” in scientific ways;
2. a study of late nineteenth-century American writing which discovers elements of pragmatism in naturalism, and vice versa, to the degree that literary texts that seem to fall under either of these rubrics must be read with greater complexity and nuance;
3. a reinterpretation of the American Romance such that our understanding of this genre is brought up to date, and offered a Marxist reading;
4. a study of the California landscape (with a careful look at poetry, architecture, landscape description and film) as a site of the underlying immateriality of materiality, and of metamorphosis, where one feels indefinitely on the threshold.

As for me, I seem to be moving in several different directions as well. I've all but completed a long study of the positive values of Poe's “aesthetic of catastrophe and ruin” which draws upon Freud's analysis of the case of Judge Schreber and his theory of the uncanny, but also Lacanian psychoanalysis, Mary Douglas's pioneering study of the epistemologically subversive properties of dirt and filth, and Bernard Tschumi's essays on architecture and disjunction. I'm also reviewing two recent books on American pragmatism for American
Literature, and I'll be delivering a paper at this year's American Comparative Literature Association conference, held in Seattle, on difficult literary negotiations between “hospitality” and “security” in an age of pandemic, terrorist infiltration, and the internet, in which space is becoming ubiquitously porous in ways that are by no means easily monitored and policed.

**CAROLYN ALLEN**

Although I continue my interest in feminist theory, I recently have been writing and teaching about emotion and affect as those two terms are used in literary study. Other disciplines (especially psychology, philosophy, geography and political theory) have long produced scholarship in either emotion or affect. In the humanities the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, though recently “affect” seems to have won out as the rubric of choice. Under it, scholars write about phenomena as different as the country's feeling of threat following 9/11, the rhetoric of neurophysiology in the nineteenth century, the bodily responses of readers of mysteries, the social empowering of racialized minorities, and the intersections of memory and loss in fiction. My forthcoming article on Marilynne Robinson discusses the presence and delineation of loneliness and kindness in her recent fiction.

**ANIS BAWARSHI**

Questions regarding “knowledge transfer” are increasingly central to Composition Studies, my main field of study, engaging some of the core issues in the study and teaching of writing and in the development of writing ability. They also get to the heart of fundamental debates about the place and purpose of first-year writing courses: about whether or not (and what kinds of) knowledge and skills developed in writing courses connect to other writing contexts within and beyond the university; whether there are generalizable writing skills that traverse contexts or whether writing skills are so situated that they can only be acquired in specific contexts. As a field, we are only beginning to understand this complex social and cognitive phenomena called “knowledge transfer” and what it means for the study and teaching of writing. Drawing on a tradition of scholarship in knowledge transfer in cognitive psychology and education, recent research on writing transfer has begun to shed light on the challenges writers face as they traverse disciplinary and professional writing contexts, highlighting the important role that meta-cognition (one's ability to monitor, inventory, and assess one's knowledge) plays in writing development.

Anis Bawarshi Over the past 25 years, scholarship in rhetorical genre studies, a second area of my research (in which I focus on everyday genres), has contributed to our understanding of how genres mediate social activities, providing insight into how systems of related genres coordinate ways of knowing and doing within recurring situations. From this scholarship has emerged a view of genres as both social (typified, recognizable, and consequential ways of organizing texts, activities, and social reality) and cognitive phenomena (involved in how we recognize, encounter, and make sense of situations). Pedagogical approaches built on this scholarship have helped us reveal the social
actions genres perform and to demystify what might be called the “grammar” of genres in ways that allow students to learn genres more critically and effectively. Current research in rhetorical genre studies has focused on “genre uptake”—the taking up or strategic performance of genres in moments of interaction and innovation. Genre uptake is informed by genre knowledge but also by one's sense of self, one's memory of prior uptakes, as well as by other affective, embodied, and material factors that make genre uptakes complex sites of agency. Such research allows us to account more fully for the dynamics of agency and the contingent, impromptu, multi-directional performances of genre—and their implications for genre research and teaching.

JESSICA BURSTEIN
What have I been doing with myself, I hear you cry. Good question. You should always keep an eye on your modernist critics; we’re sneaky. I’ve been staring at and writing about art—well, books are art, but I mean the art that hangs on walls or you find in galleries, or better yet in people’s studios. My essay on the amazing sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, who was killed in World War I at a heartbreaking young age, recently appeared in a collection called Modernism and Masculinity. I was very honored and then completely frightened to be asked to take on accounting for all of visual art (in 25 pages or less) in the new Cambridge Companion to Modernist Culture, and after months of sleepless nights came up with a way that is either going to strike people as clever or completely annoying. In my heart I dedicated that to Susan Sontag. I’ve also been enjoying the artist Ann Hamilton’s exhibit the common S E N S E at the Henry Art Gallery; she and I talked about it for 2 years in advance. I’ve never been able to see an idea grow in the brain of an artist from start to finish, and that was a real honor. Meanwhile, I’ve been sneaking off to read Muriel Spark novels. She makes my tough-boy modernists look like a bunch of kindergarteners. I’ll probably end up teaching her for another installment of my course on underread writers called “Excellent Women.”

EVA CHERNIAVSKY
In American Studies, I think much of the current scholarship is fueled by a sense of urgency around the dangers and crises of our historical present. To many scholars of U.S. culture and society, the present appears deeply precarious: the institutions of modern democratic politics seem increasingly dysfunctional; we are confronted with staggering (and ever widening) inequality, besieged by a consumerist culture ever-more organized around debt, rather than income. A watershed moment and things aren't changing for the better. Thus much of the animus of recent work in the field has been to try and understand these transformations: for example, the ideas about people and identity, markets and governments, movements and belonging, that underwrite these changes, as well as those which might allow us to imagine a more equitable and survivable future. My own most recent book looks at the changing practices and imaginaries of citizenship: what does citizenship signify and for whom? What forms of agency does citizenship yet confer? Part of my argument in the book is that popular culture has been in many respects more canny and discerning in thinking these questions than political theory, and my study moves
eclectically across a range of contemporary narratives, including science fiction (print and televised) and post-civil-rights era African American literature.

**LOUIS CHUDE-SOKEI**

I spent 2014 completing the first of a two volume set of books on the paralleled histories of race and technology: The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics (Wesleyan UP). It will appear this year and the follow-up should go to press in 2016. I’ve also begun to focus my primary research on the impact new African immigration has been having on American racial categories and politics since the middle of the twentieth century. What holds it together is the quite staggering fact that more blacks have arrived in the United States from the African continent since 1990 than did at the height of the slave trade. I intend to supplement this with work focused on the impact of those waves of African immigration into Europe as well as less acknowledged zones of black disembarkation. This latter project connects very closely to the autobiographical work I’ve been publishing over the last few years and I hope to complete a work of literary non-fiction entitled “An Immigrant Alphabet” by 2016.

**MONIKA KAUP**

My promotion to Professor became effective in Fall 2014. I am currently pursuing a dual focus: 1) continuing work on the Baroque/New World Baroque/Neobaroque that is emerging as a major cultural category in modernity, and 2) while on sabbatical in 2014/15, beginning work on a new book project on the question, “What Comes After Poststructuralism?”

I gave a keynote address at a conference on “The Baroque and the Emotions” in Melbourne, Australia and an invited presentation at the 2014 Conference on “Rudolfo Anaya: Tradition, Modernity, and the Literatures of the U.S.” Article versions of both lectures, “Feeling Baroque in Art and Neuroscience: Joy, Sadness, Pride, as well as a Spinozist Solution to the Quest for Happiness,” and “Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima: A Nuevomexicano Contribution to the Hemispheric Genealogy of the New World Baroque,” are forthcoming in conference proceedings. In June 2014, I was a featured speaker at the 15th International Baroque Summer Course, on “Baroque and Neobaroque in the Spanish and Portuguese World,” at the Werner Oechslin Library Foundation in Einsiedeln, Switzerland, with a presentation on “Theorizing the Baroque’s Alternative Modernity with Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory.”

My new book project, “Post-Poststructuralism: New Ecological Realisms in Contemporary Theory and Post-Apocalyptic Narrative” is about a trend towards new realisms after poststructuralism. Within this broader movement, my point of intervention is to orient myself towards a realism of complex wholes, actor-networks, and ecologies, rather than a realism of isolated parts and things. The book aggregates contemporary theorists and theoretical orientations from philosophy and non-reductionist biology and
explores applications of these ideas in close readings of recent post-apocalyptic fiction (such as Atwood’s MaddAddam Series, and McCarthy’s The Road).

JEFF KNIGHT

What’s going on in Renaissance literature, textual studies, and the history of books? In a word: reading. But we’re not so much reading for hidden depths anymore. In the last decade or so, there have been various compelling calls to rethink the old idea of the literary critic heroically unmasking what is latent or concealed in writing. This revisionist thinking extends from Eve Sedgwick’s classic distinction between “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” (1997) through to Bruno Latour’s summary statement, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” (2004), to recent approaches to “surface reading” (Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus) “distant reading” (Franco Moretti), “descriptive reading” (Heather Love), and “uncritical reading” (Michael Warner), among others. Attending to what is manifest in writing has brought together an array of already emerging critical schools – from historical formalism to the digital humanities – in productive dialogue about the materiality of texts, networks and systems, affect, the development of style, and the entwine ment of human and nonhuman actors in making meaning. New databases and visualization engines give us a clearer sense of how medieval libraries were dispersed through Reformation iconoclasm, while new attention to reprinting in Shakespeare’s sonnets or Montaigne’s Essays helps us better understand the dynamics of premodern sexuality and the stakes of “straightening out” those texts in modernity. This year’s speaker series, “Histories and Futures of Reading,” cosponsored by the Simpson Center and the Textual Studies Program, is a testament to the range and vitality of reading as a topic of interest in literary studies today.

CHARLES LAPORTE

What’s going on in my scholarly field these days? Well, perhaps I ought to begin by saying “fields,” since my work charts the relationship between poetry and religion in the nineteenth century. It’s a complicated business, and an enduring source of fascination for me. Recently, for instance, I learned that this era produced a genre of what were once called “Shakespearean sermons.” Imagine nineteenth-century preachers (in pulpits!) saying things like, “I take my text from Measure for Measure.” My own students have sometimes remarked upon my zeal in the classroom, but it turns out that we don’t know the half of it. Next time the issue comes up, I can pull out a bona fide Shakespearean sermon and say, “Now, this, my friends, is what a fanatical devotion to poetry looks like.”

Meanwhile, I hope to finish my next book quickly enough to benefit from what scholars are calling the “religious turn” in new literary studies: the recent revival of interest in religious literatures, the reassessment of what secularization means, the belated realization among literary critics and other scholars that the academy has generally underestimated the force of religion in the modern world. Poetry does help us to understand it better, I think, in ways that I am still sorting out. I am grateful to my excellent colleagues and students for aiding my reflections on these and so many related matters.
COLETTE MOORE

My research in the history of the English language combines very new technologies with very old ones: sophisticated and multifunctional electronic databases and digital tools for analysis, on the one hand, and original manuscripts in Middle English (handwritten on vellum with a quill) on the other. Often, in fact, these go hand-in-hand, as more medieval manuscripts are becoming digitized and publically available.

Middle English language provides several helpful reference points for considering the English language today. Studying the ways that medieval England was multilingual and multidialectal, for example, is important context for thinking about the relationship of different languages and dialects in the present-day United States. And studying the effects of language contact when Latin was a lingua franca teaches us about the spread of global Englishes in postcolonial and anti-colonial settings.

In my teaching, I have enjoyed exploring these issues and others. This term, I am teaching a new 200-level course pitched at non-majors, called “Invented Languages: from Elvish to Dothraki” which will provide students with a set of linguistic tools in phonology and grammar in order to look at different constructed languages. Examining imaginary languages turns out to be a great way to learn about the structure of English. They also provide us a window into our culture and literary imagination. Marianne Moore famously described poetry as presenting “imaginary gardens with real toads in them” – I see constructed languages as the kind of “real toad” that makes our imaginary gardens so vivid.

BRIAN REED

The study of contemporary American poetry remains a free-for-all. Do you value adventurous, edgy, experimental writing? Do you prefer poetry that speaks from the heart, that speaks to and for popular audiences? What role should poetry play, if any, in twenty-first-century concerns such as environmentalism and the quest for social justice? Do digital technologies represent the death of poetry, or its salvation? To praise a particular poet is to declare, overtly or covertly, a critic’s allegiance to one or more warring “camps.” Moreover, given the general flux and uncertainty, writing clear, readable poetry criticism with a well-defined point of view can have a strangely immediate impact.

I haven’t recovered yet from the shock of seeing one of my recent articles quoted in the headnote for a writer who has just been added to the new edition of the Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Poetry. In other words, a critic can write something speculative and risky one day, and blammo a few days later have it end up in a textbook, being presented as settled truth and received opinion. That’s both exciting and disorienting. You’re helping to turn the here-and-now, in all its vibrancy and complexity, into “the past,” something that future generations can discuss and analyze in school. Do you, as a critic, accept that responsibility? Refuse it? Change the subject?
The essay, as writers of it never tire of reminding ourselves, comes from the French “essai,” which means “trial,” “experiment,” “attempt.” This is the center of the “nonfiction” I’m interested in: the book-length essay. The personal essay. The lyric essay. “Essay” throws the emphasis squarely on the literary. Not straightforward journalism, though essay can of course encompass that. Not straightforward memoir, though of course essay can encompass that as well. For me, the key move is to take the supposed raison d’être of nonfiction and use it as a trampoline off which to bounce into the most serious questions: What is “truth”? What is “reality”? What is memory? What is knowledge? What is a self? How much can a self know of an other? The most interesting aspects of existence are thus foregrounded.

The real story isn’t in the drama of what happens; it’s what we’re thinking about while nothing, or very little, is happening. The singular obsessions, endlessly revised. The sound of one hand clapping. The sound of a person sitting alone in the dark, thinking. Montaigne wore a pewter medallion inscribed with the words “What do I know?”—thereby forming and backforming a tradition: Lucretius, On the Nature of Things. St. Augustine, Confessions. Blaise Pascal, Pensées. Rousseau, Confessions. Rochefoucauld, Maxims.

Given those interests, here are some of the directions of my new work:

In a culture of abundance, I’m trying to adopt a strategy of abundance rather than one of artificial scarcity. I’m trying to take a potential weakness (publishing “too frequently”) and turn it into a strength—a model that’s much closer to how the culture now works rather than a 19th century or 20th century model of a tome every several years. My life centers around art-making, and my art centers around my life. The result is an active engagement in (I hope) both my life and the culture’s life. (There may well be a technological and economic aspect to this: Withholding makes sense if one is selling individual items, but if everything is available to everyone for free or via subscription, the commercial motivation for withholding is reduced.)

I explore “myself” but always in the context of a specific thematic/philosophical investigation—e.g., celebrity, sexuality, race, mortality, “reality”—and this, I hope, is what distinguishes my work from standard oversharing. I’m very interested in disclosure, rather than silence, in literary and emotional risk, and the attendant anxiety within myself and the reader and the culture as a whole.

RECENT AND FORTHCOMING BOOKS:

Other People: Takes and Mistakes, forthcoming from Knopf/Random House in 2016. I’m substantially reconceiving and recombining seventy-three essays in order to form a sustained meditation on otherness: can one person know another person? How do we live through other people? How do other people live through us? Is the gap between people fillable? If not, how does or doesn’t art fill the gap?


That Thing You Do With Your Mouth: The Sexual Autobiography of Samantha Matthews, as told to David Shields, forthcoming from McSweeney’s Books, June 2015. A narrative that explores what is for Samantha and for me and for many people a crucial or even the question: how and to what degree is it possible to get beyond early trauma?

Life Is Short—Art Is Shorter: In Praise of Brevity, coauthor/coeditor (with former UW grad student Elizabeth Cooperman), forthcoming from Hawthorne Books, April 2015. A sustained argument for the excitement and
urgency of literary brevity in a hyper-digital, post-religious age.


How Literature Saved My Life, Knopf, 2013. Blending confessional criticism and cultural autobiography, I explore the power of literature to make life survivable, even endurable.

JULIET SHIELDS

Recently, many scholars working on the eighteenth century have been exploring the connections between literature and science. In the eighteenth century, the humanities and sciences had not yet separated into distinct disciplines of study. The language and methodology of the natural sciences—chemistry, physiology, and botany, for instance—contributed to the development of formal realism and the depiction of fictional worlds. Scientists in turn presented their research to the public in the form of poems or literary dialogues. For instance, in 1789 Erasmus Darwin, father of Charles Darwin, wrote a long and widely read poem on botany called The Loves of the Plants. Research on the connections between literature and science promises to generate exciting new forms of interdisciplinarity. Some scholars of eighteenth-century literature are working with scholars in the sciences to develop programs in the medical humanities or in the history of science. At next year’s Modern Language Association convention in Austin, Texas, I will be chairing a panel on this topic.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR

One of most exciting things going on in the department (and broader university) from my perspective is the rise of the environmental humanities. It seems I got to campus at just the right time, as the “Future of the Environmental Humanities” symposium that Gary Handwerk, Sabine Wilke, and Richard Watts organized last year kicked off a month after I arrived, and brought a number of the biggest names in the field (Larry Buell, Ursula Heise, Stephanie LeMenager) to campus. That event sparked ongoing conversations, including a daylong seminar this year, and may even result in an environmental humanities minor. I also got to participate in the day-long “Ben Rabinowitz Seminar on Climate Ethics” hosted by the UW Philosophy department. Thus, I get the benefit of being in the thick of things without actually having done anything. I’ve also been able to tap into this burgeoning interest in my teaching, at both the undergraduate and graduate level. This Winter, I taught both English 365: “Literature & the Environment” and a graduate seminar on “The Nature of the Nineteenth-Century Novel,” pairing a series of nineteenth-century novels from
Britain, the US, France, and South Africa with recent work in ecocriticism, science studies, and the environmental humanities. Lastly, I would like to add that I have found the Textual Studies speaker series organized by Jeff Knight to be a major source of intellectual stimulation, and one that has sparked a somewhat unexpected (and extremely enriching) turn to book history in my work. I took my English 335: “Age of Victoria” class to the library special collections to examine the original part issues of Dickens's Bleak House as well as the UW's extensive collection of works by William Morris's Kelmscott Press (which sought to revive craft printing in industrial Britain), and plan to have my spring session of that course participate in the "Book Traces" project (http://www.booktraces.org), which I just learned about from a recent visiting speaker.

JOHN WEBSTER

My interests of late have continued my ongoing focus on pedagogy, but have expanded to include reading more widely in cognitive and learning sciences. I've adopted psychologist/economist Daniel Kahneman as an honorary saint (though he is still reluctant to grant that Freud might just be slightly worth reading), and have been developing ways to integrate a range of insights on learning and thinking into my lower division classrooms. I plan to take part in the UW's upcoming Scholarship of Teaching and Learning fair where graduate student Liz Brown and I will be reporting on efforts to enact some of these changes in an English department 200-level multi-lingual classroom.