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Letters

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Deconstructing Nature

What is understood by the word "nature"? Does it refer to something untouched by human hands: virgin forests, undeveloped beaches, inaccessible mountains? Or does it have a broader definition that encompasses human beings, as well as the whole of their culture and technology? Where exactly does nature begin and end, and how are our conceptions of it changing? The 1999/2000 Fellows Program, "Constructions, Deconstructions, and Destructions of Nature," will explore these and similar questions, considering the development of concepts of nature across a wide variety of disciplines. This year's participants include scholars from Vanderbilt's departments of history, philosophy, anthropology, classical studies, geology, astronomy, German, and fine arts, as well as a visiting professor of English. The program's co-directors are Michael Bess, associate professor of history, and David Wood, professor of philosophy. Professors Bess and Wood met with *Letters* recently to discuss their plans and hopes for the program.

LETTERS: What does the title of the program mean? Most people would agree that nature can be destroyed, but what would it mean for nature to be constructed or deconstructed?

DAVID WOOD: We are all acquainted with nature, whether it be last year's tornadoes or this year's tomatoes. Nature seems, straightforwardly, to be what's "out there," something we realize we are part of when we feel hungry. But "nature" is not just what is real, what is out there. When placed in opposition to "culture," it has played a powerful cognitive role in organizing human life and thought. And one of the hallmarks of early deconstruction was to problematize this simple opposition. It is clear, for example, that we approach nature through all kinds of cultural mediations and constructions, which themselves change through history. And these cultural constructions are not just shaping or distorting lenses; they often lead directly to transformations of nature. (When "nature" is treated as a resource, a mountain becomes a pile of quarriable stone.) So the word "deconstruction" in the title reflects our hope that we can get clearer about the complex role that "nature" plays in our thinking, in our understanding of ourselves, and in our practical existence.

Michael Bess and David Wood

This issue is important in academic life, in part because university institutions are constructed on the basis of distinctions between natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, as if these were separate fields of inquiry, distinctions that depend on how we think about nature. Deconstruction has made it easier to focus on the boundaries, the frontiers, the contaminations, the difficulties in making these clear-cut distinctions. And one of the exciting things about having a seminar in which people from a variety of different disciplines come together is that we can explore these boundaries from many sides.

MICHAEL BESS: Construction and deconstruction are really two sides of the same coin. I initially came to this topic with an assumption that I had always loved nature and had felt that wilderness and the ocean had a special importance for me. But what started happening as I studied how people have derived meaning from nature was that their meanings changed from century to century and society to society. Although I would have admitted from the outset that this was so, it was nevertheless quite striking to me that the word "nature" meant something so vastly different in different historical and cultural contexts.

The last time I participated as a Fellow at the Warren Center, the topic was "Science and Society." It was clear to me that the natural scientists in the program meant something different by "nature" than I did. The natural scientists would readily acknowledge that there had been paradigm shifts over the centuries and that what a scientist would call nature changes over time. But their underlying assumption, epistemologically speaking, was very different. Even if there is not one eternal thing called "nature" out there for us to discover, they seemed to be saying, we are nevertheless approximating reality. We are coming ever closer to a true representation of the natural world. I found that humanists and social scientists were much more comfortable with throwing that away—saying that it is much more unclear how nature and culture shape each other.

This rift between the natural sciences and the humanities and

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WOOD: Nature as a category will occasionally break in on any conception we have of ourselves.

social sciences I see as a recurring theme. I wanted to go more deeply into the epistemological and metaphysical assumptions that lie underneath the two cultures of the university, underneath the way we divide the university, as we approach this topic of nature.

WOOD: All kinds of phantoms and fantasies arise at this point. Some scientists conclude that humanists and post-humanists have abolished nature altogether and succumbed to relativism. But anyone who studies the history of science discovers that there has been no single, continuous accumulation of knowledge. There have been dramatic reversals, seismic transformations. The more sophisticated response to this problem begins with the recognition that the real world is not just what we make of it, nor do we have direct access to the real world. We need more complex accounts of the way in which our theories interact with the real. It is not just a matter of falsification and verification; there are other considerations involved. If our seminar is successful, we will have a high level discussion about the ways in which science is itself a construction: neither a false construction nor the truth with a capital T. Otherwise, science turns into scientism, that is, another kind of religion. And that seems to me to be a betrayal and a tragic misunderstanding. Science does not need to make those claims. Science is a practice the integrity of which depends on it making itself vulnerable to transformation, allowing its hypotheses to be overturned. It is not about the production of a fixed and permanent body of knowledge.

Those transformations may come from left field. They may be unexpected. For example, someone might discover a new way of construing reality that could eliminate an entire subject matter. Such things happen, and they are what interest philosophers and historians of science.

BESS: One obvious area where this is being applied is neurophysiology—neurophysiology as the basis for consciousness in the brain. I have a friend who is a brain researcher in the field of neurology, and his goal is to show how mental states exist in a one to one relationship with neuronal activity—and eventually, to abolish psychology.

WOOD: Yes, that is a nice example. And if that were to work, it would have a dramatic impact on what we call the philosophy of mind. Many philosophers of mind today would point out the conceptual difficulties of making the move that your neurophysiologist friend claims he is making. One of those difficulties would be that to obtain this one to one correlation, scientists have to rely at some point on the reports made by individual subjects about what they believe is going on in their brains.

BESS: That reminds me of a quotation from the English cultural historian, Raymond Williams. He said, “Ideas of nature are the projected ideas of men.” If you look at what we have said so far in the conversation, it would seem that although our topic is nature, what we are really discussing is ourselves, and the uses to which we have put the material world—uses both in a utilitarian, pragmatic sense and in the sense of creating a context of meaning.

WOOD: Of course, we have not been talking just about ourselves. What is interesting is that nature as a category will occasionally break in on any conception we have of ourselves. To talk about ourselves is precisely to talk about our relation, our exposure, to something other than ourselves. To be human is not to be an isolated, solitary being.

Modern philosophy, beginning with Descartes in the seventeenth century, provided a new foundation for knowledge in the individual subject that can clearly and distinctly assert its own existence. But Descartes bought this certainty at a huge price, namely that of treating as a separate kind of substance the extended world, the world of nature, and thus instituting a deep division between man and nature. The last two centuries have seen this metaphysical distinction repeatedly breaking down. People have realized in many different ways that to be a man, to be a woman, is intrinsically to be related, to have, or *to be,* a relation to other humans, to the social world, and to nature. This is part of what it is to be human.

So in that sense, I would agree with you that in order to explore nature, we have to explore ourselves. What becomes crucial is the conception of self or being human that we have.

LETTERS: Could you perhaps give some examples of different constructions of nature that you have seen operating in your own research and study?

BESS: There is an excellent book called *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas,* by Donald Worster, a professor at the University of Kansas. He takes a subset of the concept “nature”—ecology—and traces its development. The word was coined in the mid-nineteenth century, but Worster goes back a century before, to Linnaeus. What he shows is that Linnaeus was infused with the categorizing mentality of the Enlightenment, with its notion of an ordered, structured set of lists arranged in a hierarchy, like a flow chart.

Worster then traces the concept of ecology to other historical moments. He looks at Thoreau, who has an utterly different, Romantic vision of nature. Nature is no longer a static, rigid taxonomy; it becomes protean, upwelling, a vital force erupting forth, proliferating, unpredictable, and metastasizing. Then, when Darwin arrives on the scene, what Thoreau had created suddenly becomes racked with competition and the struggle for domination. For Thoreau, there had been profusion; for Darwin, the underlying metaphor becomes scarcity and competition for resources.

In the early twentieth century, we see the appearance of truly ecological thinkers who look at the natural world and what technological man has done to it—people like John Muir, for example, who see nature as being damaged. What they imagine is

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BESS:
One of our definitions of nature is that it is anything that we do not control.

that there once existed a natural harmony that has been disrupted. But if it could be restored, if we could undo our disruption, then nature would return to a sort of resting place, which is its natural equilibrium point.

More recently, there is chaos theory. Now the underlying assumption is no longer that there is an equilibrium, but rather that nature is in some respects quite fluid and qualitatively unpredictable. And so, from the eighteenth century through the twentieth, various representations of nature through the prism of ecology emerge, paralleling the evolution of Western society and culture during the same period.

WOOD: Yes, though my sense is that there is no one current reigning paradigm of nature. In fact, we have a struggle, or if you prefer, a play, between different models of nature. If you look, for example, at the debates over wilderness—not academic discussions of this issue, but public funding debates—you can see that a number of these models are tied up with religious and political positions that people have taken, and, especially in the United States, with different stages of development. It was once common (and convenient) to think of Native Americans as savages—in other words, as part of nature—and hence able to be treated in certain ways. But now we have come to see that there are different ways of being civilized, and that the ways in which many Native American tribes lived in relation to nature may have more of a future than the strip mall model of development that we have embraced (or that has embraced us) today.

Thinking of these competing models, I am reminded of the movie *Jaws,* which depicts nature as threat, as lurking menace. Just when you thought it was safe to go back into the water, when we seem to have our science and technology all sorted out, nature will return, with a vengeance.

The shark in *Jaws* is the unpredictable dimension of nature that man will never control.

And yet, "the call of the wild" still moves us. Many of us want to go trekking in the wilderness, but we do not want Coke cans there; we want our "natural," unadulterated nature. Here we still inherit something of the transcendentalists' view of nature. We look at the landscape paintings of Thomas Cole, and I, for one, am still seduced. These paintings present nature either as a gift from God, or, indeed, as divine itself. And that vision still lives on, alongside deforestation and clear cutting in Oregon.

A similar tension exists in medicine today. On the one hand, people are moving towards holistic ways of thinking about their bodies, thinking about how they ought to live. On the other hand, the best hospitals compete to provide the latest technology—drugs, equipment, and surgical techniques. We consider the body as a whole, as something with its own integrity, the model of a human being as a natural organism. And yet for much medical treatment, the body is something to be broken into small parts, each of which can be fixed separately. We have not chosen, and cannot choose, between these two approaches. And what is fascinating about your ecological history is that most of those models survive intact and struggle for supremacy.

BESS: I change hats myself. When I work in the garden and want to figure out what plant to put in what corner, I am a taxonomist. Sometimes I become a Darwinian, when I try to understand how animals are relating to each other or to the birds in the neighborhood. It is not an ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny situation, in which we are all replications of some final stage. Virtually all of these stages, all of these models are still present and active, as you have said, and sometimes they war with each other. Sometimes they simply coexist, and we draw upon them as from a smorgasbord.

WOOD: Sometimes different models answer different questions. One question is: how did these things get here? How is it that we have the birds that we have? Another question is: how are these birds organized into species and subspecies? I hope that we will discover in the course of our seminar that we are asking, at times, different questions. And that what looked like disagreements turn out not to be disagreements at all, but answers to different questions. That is the kind of conceptual work that a group of people like us can do very effectively. And that moves us, as you were suggesting, away from war and towards the possibility of a reconciliation, or at least an understanding of how different positions have different limits of application, or respond to different issues.

LETTERS: If there are many competing attitudes towards nature in our own cultural moment, would you say that any of them are dominant—or at least more powerful than others?

WOOD: There is perhaps one big struggle surrounding the human desire to dominate nature. The driving force of modern technology and capital is to organize the world in such a way that resources are extractable—to manufacture them, distribute them, and profit from them. At this level there is a dominant attitude towards nature. And yet in all kinds of areas we can witness resistance to that dominant orientation. Resistance from people whose health is compromised or threatened by an increasingly toxic environment. And conceptual resistance from all kinds of people who do not believe that the earth is just a mirror of our capacities to manipulate and organize it.

BESS: I am working on a book about environmentalism in France. At one point I was studying the evolution over time of the points of view of a single minister of agriculture under DeGaulle. In the early 1960s this man, Edgar Pisani, was a great proponent of the industrialization of agriculture. He was trying to create agribusiness in France, and to break apart the old peasant society, which had existed in its own very particular symbiosis with nature. Here is an example of the French fighting themselves, torn between the impulse toward modernization in agriculture and industry and the pain not just of harming the natural world, but of harming the peasant society that had developed a distinctively French relationship to that world.

At first Pisani was identified with the group that said no, we

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must proceed resolutely with modernization despite the costs. But then, twenty years later, the ecological revolution had swept through France, and everyone had become excited about green ideas. Pisani then came forward and said, I was wrong. I was looking at the problem in too narrow a way, and I now believe that we must resist the model of agribusiness. His position became much more complicated, more ambivalent—and hence more interesting.

Wood: I teach a freshman seminar on environmental philosophy. Some of my students in the course have written essays that have the following remarkable structure: "Yes, the human species may die out. But nature is a constantly evolving process, and some other kind of being will evolve once we are out of the way."

Bess: Once we have destroyed ourselves.

Wood: Yes. Could it be mere sentimentality to think that our destruction matters? After all, there will be new beings, cyborgs, or something else, that will evolve from us, or after us. We take a very narrow perspective when we are concerned only about our children and whether they will have enough places to swing and hike. We may actually be facing the most extraordinary frontier—the frontier of nature as an ultimately creative, responsive, and transformative power, which regards human beings simply as a trace that is overcome and left behind.

Bess: Katherine Hayles, a researcher in the English Department at UCLA, is a wonderfully creative thinker about the boundary between nature and culture. She has become interested in a concept called artificial life. Within a computer one creates entities, in a sort of virtual world. Once a certain level of complexity is reached, these entities in a sense create an environment. There are geometric spaces within which they "live," and rules that govern their interactions within the boundaries of these spaces. The entities begin to acquire emergent properties that mesh with our definition of living beings—they can grow over time, or reproduce, or die.

What struck me in thinking about this is that one of our definitions of nature is that it is anything we do not control. The artificial, the human world, is where we have some form of mastery, of dominance. We make the rules and govern how things will work. But then there is a return of the repressed, an eruption, an assertion or rebellion from the out of control. The out of control can be like the shark in *Jaws*, in the sense of a pre-existing biological reality coming back and biting us in the rear end, or it can be something coming out of our computers and surprising us with all kinds of unpredictable, strange events that we had no say in creating and which take us utterly aback.

Wood: That is an anthropocentric definition of nature. But the other way we could put this is that nature consists of an indefinite number of partial systems of control. We are not in control of nature because we are not God. There are other bits of nature that seek to control their bit of the environment. So what we are up against, precisely because we are a piece of nature, are the natural limits of our control. We control, as best we can, the environment we live in. We build houses to protect ourselves against the rain, and then we find armies of termites marching towards us to the beat of a different drum.

Bess: That is what I am calling the pre-existing order, of which we are a part. What I find interesting about artificial life is that here people are using the terms of nature to talk about something that is clearly a machine. Nothing could be more dependent on us—the computer has to be plugged in. But then there is some slippage, and suddenly we have created phenomena that are unpredicatble and uncontrollable.

Letters: How does your current research intersect with the concerns of this program?

Bess: Since I have already spoken about my work on environmentalism in France, perhaps David could answer this one.

Wood: I am not a card-carrying Druid, but I have come to believe that the tree is a very important phenomenon and symbol in human culture. There is a wonderful book by Robert Pogue Harrison called *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization,* which traces the history of our conception of forests as a wild region—an area in which lawlessness hides and recuperates, and from which cities and civilization mark their distance.

But my interest in trees is actually more philosophical than that. I have noticed that when philosophers want to give an example of something that they are looking at, they tend to choose a tree. This is true of Plato, Berkeley, Descartes, Sartre, Heidegger, and many others. Even in Saussure's extraordinary *Course in General Linguistics*, the example of a sign is the word "tree"—complete with a little picture. Why? I believe that there is a deep story here, a story that we need to unearth. When we use trees as an example, we hardly ever discuss the fact that they are living beings, or the fact that they form—as you were suggesting when you mentioned Linnaeus—the basis for our understanding of classification systems. This has itself become an object of considerable interest to people like the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who want to say that the tree is only one model of organizing knowledge. There are other models which do not depict a vertical unity, or produce a nicely ordered set of relations, but which might suggest a spreading "rhizomal" network, such as we find in crabgrass. My question would be: if there were no trees, would we still think the way we do?

Bess: This reminds me of the work of Hans Moravec, a man who works in robotics. He has proposed the concept of the "robot tree"—that is, the idea of organizing a robot with the functionality of a tree in mind, rather than that of a human being. He says that it makes more sense to have little components which could come together and form larger functional units. He calls them a "tree" because they are structured according to the principle of classic branching. In other words, his ideas make us consider how we are pre-structuring our thinking about function. We have one idea of functionality if we use a human being as a metaphor, and another if we use a tree.

Wood: One way that we structure our thinking is by privileging unity over division. We assume that multiplicity can be reduced to twoness, which can then be reduced to oneness. What the "non-tree" mode of thinking would do would be to allow multiplicity.

When we began this conversation, I said that when we think about nature, we unconsciously invoke the binary opposition nature/culture. And this, indeed, is how much of our thought is structured. But could we have concepts that were not organized in this way—fundamental organizing concepts that were not binary? Could we think like that? Do we already?

Bess: Instead of subject-predicate, there would have to be some sort of matrix.

Wood: Right.

Bess: Something much more dispersed.

Wood: And I predict that this is how the human and the natural sciences will come together, through fields, matrices, and networks. Insofar as there are fields in the natural sciences, there are analogues to what is privileged as "meaning" in the human sciences.

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John K. Roth Named Consultant to the 1999/2000 Holocaust Program

During the 1999/2000 academic year, the Warren Center will host "The Holocaust, Genocide, and the Teaching of Ethical Values," a project funded by the Zimmerman Foundation and the Tennessee Holocaust Commission. Scholars and teachers from across Tennessee will meet regularly to discuss the creation of curricula for secondary schools and universities that will teach about the Holocaust and promote strategies for the prevention of similar atrocities. Participants, selected in a statewide competition, include professors from five universities and eight disciplines, as well as two high school teachers recognized for their outstanding contributions to the teaching of the Holocaust. In the summer of 2000, an intensive three-week seminar for high school teachers will be held at the Warren Center to create materials for curricula based on the work of the faculty colloquium.

The Holocaust Program was orginally conceived by Beverly Asbury, University chaplain emeritus at Vanderbilt and former chair of the Tennessee Holocaust Commission. Asbury has long been concerned about the failure of Christians to come to terms with the Holocaust. He will serve as an adviser to the project. Ernest G. Freudenthal, adjunct associate professor of management of technology in the School of Engineering at Vanderbilt, will serve the program as liaison with the Tennessee Holocaust Commission.

John K. Roth, Russell K. Pitzer Professor of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College, has been named as a consultant to the program. Roth, who also teaches at Claremont Graduate University, is a nationally recognized expert in Holocaust studies. In 1988, he was named the U.S. National Professor of the Year by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. His postdoctoral appointments have included a Graves Fellowship in the Humanities, Fulbright Lectureships in Austria and Norway, and a fellowship from the National Humanities Institute at Yale University. He has also served as a member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. His books include *A Consuming Fire: Encounters with Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust; Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy* (with Richard L. Rubinstein); *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (edited with Carol Rittner); and, most recently, *Private Needs, Public Selves: Talk About Religion in America.*

Biographical information about the participants follows:

William James Booth, professor of political science at Vanderbilt University, is the author of *Households: On the Moral Architecture of the Economy* and *Interpreting the World: A Study of Kant's Philosophy of History and Politics.* He has also co-edited two collections of essays and published articles on Marxist political economy and classical Greek economic theory. His research considers the relationships between political identity, moral accountability, and the politics of memory. In particular, he is interested in the ethics of remembrance associated with the Holocaust in Germany and the Vichy years in France.

Penelope H. Brooks, professor of psychology at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, is a specialist in cognitive and moral development. She has published numerous articles on the development of cognitive processes in mental retardation and on issues of public policy surrounding the prevention of children's injuries. She is interested in applying the insights of psychology to the study of how people come to commit atrocities, and to the challenge of teaching moral reasoning.

Joel Dark, assistant professor of history at Tennessee State University, received his Ph.D from Vanderbilt in 1998. He specializes in modern European history and is interested in the question of how to bring the significance of the Holocaust to ethnic and social groups with histories of oppression.

Paul B. Fleming teaches ninth grade government and tenth grade world studies at Hume-Fogg Academic Magnet High School in Nashville. He has received several awards and grants for excellence in Holocaust education, including a Mandel Teacher Fellowship from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum for the 1999/2000 school year and the Belz-Lipman Award from the Tennessee Holocaust Commission in 1997.

Jay Geller, lecturer in religious studies at Vanderbilt University, explores the relationship between the narrative ordering of events and Jewish identity. He has published extensively on Jewish identity in the work of Sigmund Freud and has co-edited the volume *Reading Freud's Reading.* He is at work on a two-volume essay collection that will relate the discourse of Jewish identity to the discourses of psychoanalysis and modernity. He is also interested in the controversy surrounding the authenticity of Wilkomirski's *Fragments.*

Sue Chaney Gilmore teaches Latin and Advanced Placement European History at Hillsboro High School in Nashville. She is also a member of the core faculty at the Tennessee Governor's School of International Studies and has served on the Tennessee Holocaust Commission Teachers Council. Her awards and honors include Fulbright and Mellon Grants, as well as the Tufts University Outstanding Teacher Award.

Teresa A. Goddu, associate professor of English at Vanderbilt University, specializes in American literature and culture. She is the author of *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation,* and of articles on Edgar Allan Poe, country music, Gloria Naylor, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. At present she is at work on a book that examines the relationship between the representation of slavery in antebellum literature and the culture of the marketplace. Her other research interests include the pedagogical and ethical issues surrounding the representation and remembrance of historical trauma.

Peter J. Haas, associate professor of religious studies and associate professor of Jewish literature and thought at Vanderbilt University, is a co-director of the Holocaust Colloquium. He is the author of four books, including *Morality After Auschwitz: The Radical Challenge of the Nazi Ethic* and *Responsa: Literary History of a Rabbinic Genre.* His recent work explores the relationship between science and moral discourse.

Sonja Maria Hedgepeth, associate professor of German at Middle Tennessee State University, has published a book and several articles on the work of Else Lasker-Schüler. Her research interests include the discourses of Jewish-German identity and the literary representation of exile. Her book in progress, *Wesenhaft anders,* traces the writing career of Paula Buber.

David Alan Patterson, Bornblum Chair of Excellence in Judaic Studies and Director of the Bornblum Judaic Studies Program at the University of Memphis, has published ten books on a wide variety of subjects, including Holocaust diaries and memoirs, alienation in modern Russian literature, the criticism of Mikhail Bakhtin, and the relationship between religion and literature. His most recent book, *Along the Edge of Annihilation: The Collapse and Recovery of Life in the Holocaust Novel,* is being published this year by the University of Washington Press.

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Kathleen Hall Jamieson to Present the 1999 Harry C. Howard Jr. Lecture

This year's Harry C. Howard Jr. Lecture will be presented by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, professor of communication and dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Her talk, "Buying Influence: Advertising and the Political Process," will be given on Thursday, October 14 at 4:10 p.m. in 126 Wilson Hall.

Professor Jamieson is the author or co-author of nine books, including *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction and Democracy,* as well as *Packaging the Presidency,* which received the Speech Communication Association's Golden Anniversary Book Award, and *Eloquence in an Electronic Age,* which received the Winans-Wichelns Book Award. Her most recent book is *Spiral of Cynicism: Press and Public Good.*

Professor Jamieson is an expert on political campaigns, and in addition to her academic career, she has worked extensively as a commentator. During the 1996 general election she served as a commentator on the debates for CBS News, on advertising for *The News Hour* with Jim Lehrer, and on the discourse of the campaign for National Public Radio's *Weekend Edition* and CNN's *Inside Politics.* She is also the recipient of many fellowships and grants, including support from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Ford Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation.

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 lectureship honors Harry C. Howard, Jr. (B.A., 1951) of Atlanta and allows the Robert Penn Warren Center to bring an outstanding scholar to Vanderbilt annually to deliver a lecture on a significant topic in the humanities.

"Inventing Work" Conference

The 1998/1999 Fellows of the Warren Center have organized a conference entitled "Inventing Work" to be held at Vanderbilt University on October 22 and 23, 1999. The conference is a culmination of last year's weekly seminar meetings, in which the Fellows examined the world of work, concepts of work, and different meanings of work from a broadly interdisciplinary perspective.

Four visiting speakers will present papers at the conference sessions. The visiting scholars are Marjorie Garber, director of the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies and professor of English at Harvard Univeristy; Sharryn Kasmir, assistant professor of anthropology at Hofstra University; Peter Kwong, director of Asian-American Studies at Hunter College of the City University of New York; and Ara Wilson, assistant professor of women's studies at Ohio State University. Professor Garber's talk will be entitled "Make-Work," while Professor Kasmir will speak on "The Saturn Corporation and the Production of Post-Fordism." Professor Kwong will address the topic of "Chinese Immigrants and American Labor," and Professor Wilson will speak on "Remapping Sex Work in the Age of Globalization."

Members of the "Inventing Work" Fellows Program from Vanderbilt were Bruce Barry (Owen Graduate School of Management); Karen E. Campbell (sociology); Daniel B. Cornfield (sociology); Laura A. McDaniel (history); Mark L. Schoenfield (English); Kathryn Schwarz (English); John M. Sloop (communication studies); Helmut W. Smith (history); and Ronnie J. Steinberg (sociology and women's studies). Professor Kasmir was the William J. Vaughn Visiting Fellow at the Warren Center during the year-long program.

Please contact the Warren Center for more information about the conference sessions.

Holocaust Program

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Gary A. Phillips, professor of religion at the University of the South, is at work on a project that examines the ethics of biblical reading and the ways that the Bible has been used to perpetuate violence and anti-Semitism. He is the editor of the volume *Poststructural Criticism and the Bible: Text/History/Discourse,* and author of articles applying the work of Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas to biblical exegesis.

Helmut Walser Smith, associate professor of history at Vanderbilt University, is a co-director of the Holocaust Colloquium. A specialist in German history, he is the author of *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870-1914,* and of articles on the discourse of anti-Semitism in the German *Kaiserreich.* At present he is at work on a book that examines the experience of totalitarian rule in the former East German city of Bitterfeld from 1930 to 1961.

Margaret Vandiver, assistant professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Memphis, has published articles on capital punishment and the relationship between crime and casino gambling. She is also at work on projects that examine genocide, war crimes, and human rights violations from a criminological perspective.

Meike G.J. Werner, assistant professor of German at Vanderbilt University, has co-edited forthcoming collections of letters by Karl Korsch and Wilhelm Flitner, as well as the essay collection *German Literature, Jewish Critics.* Her published articles include work on Eugen Diederichs and on early twentieth-century student movements in Jena and Weimar.

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2000/2001 Fellows Program

The 2000/2001 Fellows Program at the Warren Center is entitled "Rediscovering the New World: Exploring Lines of Contact among the Americas and within the United States." The program will be co-directed by Vanderbilt University faculty members Earl Fitz (Portuguese, Spanish and comparative literature), Cathy L. Jrade (Spanish) and William Luis (Spanish and Hispanic diaspora studies). The seminar will examine the various ways in which the cultures of North, Central, and South America have been defined, particularly since the beginning of the nineteenth century. This period saw the establishment of independent nation-states throughout most of the hemisphere as well as the increase of the Hispanic population within the United States. As a result, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries highlight the tension between the struggle for national identities and the development of close cultural, commercial, economic, and political ties. In this regard, the role of the Hispanic diaspora, which has come to find a new "home" within the United States, is particularly important and revealing. The seminar will also look ahead to the impact of ever tighter involvement among the three Americas during the twenty-first century.

Five Vanderbilt University faculty members will be selected to join the seminar's co-directors in the year-long seminar. The Warren Center will also sponsor a Visiting Fellow with expertise in the area of study. The program will be shaped by the Visiting Fellow and the Vanderbilt faculty Fellows. Information regarding both the internal and external applications processes can be obtained from the Warren Center.

1999/2000 Fellows

Michael D. Bess, Spence and Rebecca Webb Wilson Fellow and associate professor of history, is a co-director of the 1999/2000 Fellows program. He specializes in twentieth-century European history and is particularly interested in the relationships among technology, politics, and culture in France, Britain, and Italy during the postwar period. He is the author of *Realism, Utopia, and the Mushroom Cloud: Four Activist Intellectuals and Their Strategies for Peace, 1945-1989*. At present he is working on a book on the rise of environmentalism in postwar France.

Beth A. Conklin, associate professor of anthropology and religious studies, specializes in medical anthropology and the study of indigenous peoples of lowland South America. She has worked among the Wari' Indians of western Brazil, pursuing a particular interest in their cosmology and mortuary practices. Her book, *Consuming Grief: Mortuary Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society,* is forthcoming this year from University of Texas Press. She has also published articles on the political and environmental activism of native peoples in South America.

Leonard Folgarait, chair and professor of fine arts, is the author of *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* and *So Far From Heaven: David Alfaro Siquerios' "The March of Humanity and Mexican Revolutionary Politics."* He has lectured widely on a variety of topics in modern and contemporary art, and is beginning work on a book on Picasso and cubism. In particular, he is pursuing the question of how "natural" subjects such as landscapes and nudes figure in the development of a cubist art that challenges the very existence of stable "natural" models.

Kathy L. Gaca, assistant professor of classical studies, is interested in the transformation in human understanding of nature that occurred when Christian monotheism supplanted the ancient Greek religion and cosmogonies. She has published articles on the representation of sex and desire in the New Testament and in patristic Greek texts, and is currently completing a book, *The Making of Fornication,* for the University of California Press.

Richard Grusin, William S. Vaughn Visiting Fellow and visiting associate professor of English, is chair and associate professor of the School of Literature, Communication, and Culture at the Georgia Institute of Technology. His book in progress, *The Reproduction of Nature: Art, Science, and the National Parks, 1864-1916,* examines the establishment of Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon as national parks, using a cultural historicist approach to investigate the beliefs and practices that made the creation of these parks possible. His previously published books include *Remediation: Understanding New Media* and *Transcendentalist Hermeneutics: Institutional Authority and the Higher Criticism of the Bible.*

Laurie R. Johnson, assistant professor of German, is beginning work on a project that investigates various constructions of the natural world in nineteenth-century German philosophy, psychology, and literature. She has published articles on Friedrich Schlegel, Gottfried von Strassburg, and Ingeborg Bachmann. Her book, *Remembering and Recollection in German Early Romanticism,* is currently in the review process.

Jay S. Noller, assistant professor of geology, specializes in soil geomorphology. His work investigates the influence of environmental factors and human activity on the formation of soil. He has published widely on the history and physical features of seismic faults in California, and is currently completing projects that examine El Niño's effects on the soils of the Peruvian desert.

David A. Weintraub, associate professor of astronomy, is pursuing research on the imaging and analysis of emissions from nebluae, and on theories of planet formation. He has published extensively in astronomical journals and has participated in programs to bring science education into local elementary schools.

David C. Wood, Jacque Voegeli Fellow and professor of philosophy, is a co-director of the 1999/2000 Fellows program. He is the author of *Philosophy at the Limit* and *The Deconstruction of Time,* as well as articles on Heidegger, Escher, and Italo Calvino. His research interests include the rethinking of ethics and identity in a post-humanistic context, the construction of nature within the Western philosophical tradition, and the conceptualization of time.

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Second Annual Robert Penn Warren Lecture on Southern Letters: Reynolds Price

The second annual Robert Penn Warren Lecture on Southern Letters will be delivered this year during the Tennessee Humanities Council's Southern Festival of Books by the renowned novelist, poet, and essayist Reynolds Price. Price's talk will take place on Friday, October 8 following a dinner at 6:30 p.m. at the Sheraton Downtown Nashville, 623 Union Street (formerly the Crowne Plaza Hotel).

In the words of Michael Kreyling, Professor of English at Vanderbilt and a respected critic of Southern literature, "We have, in the history of Southern literature, only a few twentieth-century figures whose accomplishments in several fields of literary creativity have amounted to excellence. The range and quality of Reynolds Price's achievements so far admit him to this company." Kreyling singles out Price's novel *The Surface of the Earth* (1975) for particular praise, calling it "one of the more significant American novels of the twentieth century."

Price was born in Macon, North Carolina, in 1933. Educated in the public schools of his native state, he earned an A.B. *summa cum laude* from Duke University. In 1955 he traveled as a Rhodes Scholar to Merton College, Oxford University to study English literature. After three years and a B.Litt. degree, he returned to Duke, where he continues teaching as James B. Duke Professor of English.

With his novel *A Long and Happy Life,* in 1962, he began a career which has produced numerous volumes of fiction, poetry, plays, essays, and memoir. *A Long and Happy Life* won the William Faulkner Award; *Kate Vaiden* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction; and his poems have won the Levinson, Blumenthal, and Tietjens awards. Other novels include *Love and Work, The Source of Light, The Tongues of Angels,* and most recently, *Roxanna Slade.* His complete poems have also been recently published.

In addition to his fiction and poetry, Price has written movingly about religious issues and their relationship to literature. In 1978, he published *A Palpable God,* a volume which includes translations of stories from the Bible and an essay on the origins of narrative. Earlier this year, he brought forth *Letters to a Man in the Fire,* a meditation on religious faith and the problem of suffering.

Price is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and his books have appeared in sixteen languages.

The Robert Penn Warren Lecture on Southern Letters began in 1998. It is jointly sponsored by the Warren Center with the Tennessee Humanities Council. Last year's inaugural lecture was delivered by Elizabeth Spencer, the distinguished Mississippi novelist.

The October 8 event will begin with cocktails at 5:30 p.m. Following the lecture, Price will sign books in the hotel ballroom. Tickets for the event are $50.00 if purchased by September 25. After September 25, tickets may be purchased only on October 8 at the Festival headquarters booth for $60.00. For tickets or further information regarding the lecture, please contact the Tennessee Humanities Council at (615) 320-7001 or *www.tn-humanities.org.*

The Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities

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Letters is the semiannual newsletter of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities at Vanderbilt University, Box 1534 Station B, Nashville, Tennessee 37235, (615) 343-6060/FAX (615) 343-2248. For more information concerning the Center or any of its programs, please contact the above address or visit our web site at *www/vanderbilt.edu/rpw_center.*

Statement of Purpose

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

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