A Note from the Chair

When I accepted a faculty position at Cornell three years ago, I knew that I would be joining a world-class English Department. What I didn’t know was how truly worldly my colleagues would turn out to be. Cornell English is constantly in motion, making our work around the world, touching lives far from Ithaca.

Take Tim Murray, for example. He has a grant from the Korean National Research Foundation to focus on Transmedia and Digital Humanities. He’s just met with one of Korea’s leading media artists to invite her to be featured in the 2020 Cornell Arts Biennial.

Lyre Van-Clief Stefanon, a prize-winning poet, has had her work featured at the National Theatre in London to mark the 100th anniversary of women in the U.K. gaining the right to vote. Her three monologues, “Magda, Jo, Isabella,” address problems of race, belonging, and class in the suffrage movement.

Then there is Elizabeth Anker, a specialist in law and literature, who taught a course to law students at the brand-new Bennett University outside of Delhi in India.

Cathy Caruth, one of the founders of the field of trauma studies, participated in an international conference in South Africa that marked the twentieth anniversary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The conference asked searching questions about the aftermath of apartheid. What is the appropriate response to the echoes of historical wounding that extend far beyond the generation that experienced the trauma directly? What strategies might quell the haunting repercussions of genocide, slavery, colonial oppression, and mass violence?

Scholar and writer Mukoma Wa Ngugi recently traveled to Ghana to trace the paths of Black American writers, contrast to Keta. Slaves were raided. He then went on to Bristol, a rich slave trading port city in England, which provided a stark contrast to Keta.

As it happens, the faculty are not the only ones going places. Our graduate students have been taking Cornell English on their own interesting journeys.

For example, PhD students Pichaya Damrongpivat and Stephen Kim organized a panel session titled “Teaching Southeast Asia Against the Grain: Cross-Disciplinary Pedagogical Approaches” in Bangkok, Thailand. They articulated the value of teaching Southeast Asian narratives, which are often left out of studies of Asia.

When you see this box, we have questions. Write to us! Tag us! Follow us! #SupportEnglish

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Your Support Matters

The English Department is abuzz with ideas and projects—what a wonderful place to come to work every day! As Chair, I am deeply proud of what we’ve been accomplishing in and out of the classroom, but I am also mindful that we couldn’t keep our lively community going without the support of generous alums and friends. I want to thank everyone who has made a gift to Cornell English.

Your gifts make a difference at every level:

- $20 allows us to fund a mentorship lunch for our graduate student peer-to-peer mentorship program.
- $50 provides a book scholarship or an essay prize for an undergraduate; it can also pay for a writer to submit a manuscript for a book prize.
- $100 makes it possible for us to offer a series of career workshops for undergraduates or to convene a reading group around emerging debates in the field.
- $250 lets us take a whole class on a meaningful field trip — such as the Cornell Cinema or local theater.
- $500 can support a student or faculty member’s attendance at an exciting professional development workshop, such as the the Folger Shakespeare Library, or the Rare Book School, which offers intensive instruction in the history of written, printed, and digital materials.
- $1000 gives a faculty member the resources to travel to an archive to complete a field-transforming book—the kind that makes us a top-ranked English Department. It can also fund carbon offsets to cover a full year of faculty travel.
- $5000 pays for a writer to attend the prestigious Breadloaf Writers’ Conference, to work with MacArthur Fellows, U.S. poets laureate, and recipients of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award.
- $2.5 million - $3 million endows a professorship.

If you’re a social media user, we’re @EnglishCornell on all platforms. Let us know how you’re Supporting English. We will be counting the ways that your gift has nourished the English Department across all of our social media accounts.

https://giving.cornell.edu/ways-to-give

#SupportEnglish
Recent Books by English Faculty

Nafissa Thompson-Spires
Heads of the Colored People
(Simon & Schuster, 2018)

“Vivid, fast, funny, way-smart, and verbally inventive,” writes novelist George Saunders, “these stories by the vastly talented Thompson-Spires create a compelling surface tension made of equal parts skepticism towards human nature and intense fondness of it. Located on the big questions, they are full of heart.” The stories feature a vibrant range of black characters who reveal the pain and frustrations shaping black citizenship today. They are both painful and acutely funny. Winner of the PEN Open Book Award and the Whiting Award, longlisted for the National Book Award, and a finalist for the Kirkus Prize and Los Angeles Times Book Prize, Thompson-Spires’s latest collection has more than proven itself to be a powerhouse in the world of short fiction.

Don’t Use Your Words: Children’s Emotions in a Networked World
(NYU Press, 2019)


Jane Juffer
Flying Under the Radar with the Royal Chicano Air Force: Mapping a Chicano/a Art History
(University of Texas Press, 2017)

Winner of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies book prize, Flying Under the Radar with the Royal Chicano Air Force tells riveting stories about a radical Chicano/a arts collective that bloomed in the second half of the twentieth century in California. Uncovering new material in the archives, Juffer shows how the group launched breakfast programs, art classes, and political and labor activism. Her book also highlights the key roles that women played in the RCAF, challenging the patriarchal norms of the Chicano/a movement.

Ella Maria Díaz
Heads of the Colored People
(Simon & Schuster, 2018)

“Firecracker of a book...a triumph of storytelling: in itself to be a powerhouse in the world of short fiction.

Molly Hite
Woolf’s Ambiguities: Tonal Modernism, Narrative Strategy, Feminist Precursors
(Cornell University Press, 2017)

Molly Hite’s newest critical book examines the narrative tone in some of Virginia Woolf’s most famous novels, including A Room of One’s Own, Mrs. Dalloway, and The Voyage Out. Hite compares Woolf to her lesser-known contemporary, activist Elizabeth Robins. The book shows that Woolf’s fiction refused to align itself with a single perspective or moral judgement, thereby inviting readers to decide for themselves.

Ernesto Quiñonez
Taina
(Penguin Random House, 2019)

Ernesto Quiñonez, author of Bodega Dreams (2000) and Chongo’s Fire (2004), once again brings his readers to his native Spanish Harlem. Mixing gritty prose with hints of magical realism, Taina follows Julio as he supports, believes, and bleeds for fifteen-year-old Taina, who claims that, though she is pregnant, she is still a virgin. Julio’s support for Taina takes him through the underworld and crime networks of Spanish Harlem, testing his faith in Taina, and ultimately pushing him to his physical, mental, and spiritual limits.

Emily Fridlund
History of Wolves
(Grove Atlantic, 2017)

Emily Fridlund’s History of Wolves is a tense, delicate, and chilling novel—an “electrifying debut,” according to NPR. The story follows a solitary teenager as she confronts a scary and yet enchanting world. Fridlund explores the taboo and the everyday with a brand-new set of eyes. This novel was a finalist for the Booker Prize and was awarded the American Academy of Arts and Letters Sue Kaufman Prize. It was also a New York Times Editor’s Choice, one of USA Today’s Notable Books, an Amazon Best Book of the Month, and a #1 Indie Next pick.

George Hutchinson
Facing the Abyss: American Literature and Culture in the 1940s
(Columbia University Press, 2018)

Facing the Abyss is the first work of literary scholarship to take stock of the 1940s as a decade. And what a fascinating period it was. Hutchinson’s book is an extraordinary work of synthesis, bringing together a vast array of writers and thinkers, politics and books, publishing and art works. And it is also a splendid read. Going against the popular belief that America was a land of hope and heroism in the 40s, Hutchinson reveals a nation confronting its own violence, controversy, and guilt. James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Mary McCarthy, Gore Vidal and others come together in this rich portrait of America’s past. This book has earned an honorable mention for the Modern Language Association Matei Calinescu Prize, awarded to “a distinguished work of scholarship in twentieth- or twenty-first-century literature and thought.”

Anker’s volume, New Directions in Law and Literature, brings together essays written by twenty-two cutting-edge scholars. It highlights recent thinking about intersections between legal and literary thought. The collection examines the history of their relationship and looks forward to their shared future. Meant to be accessible for undergraduates, law students, and academics alike, New Directions is an exciting read for those interested in law and the humanities.
Capturing the (Environmental) Imagination: New Major Mines English Department’s Natural Resources

George Hutchinson, Newton C. Farr Professor of American Culture, noticed a gap in Cornell’s course offerings when he arrived here in 2012. “We’ve got the best agriculture school in the world, and yet science…we’ve got one of the best English departments, tremendous humanities departments, and there was nothing that was joining these together, so I designed a new course and started offering it, and I really enjoyed teaching it.” Professor Hutchinson’s course, “The Environmental Imagination in American Literature,” is now a standard part of the course rotation in the department.

Hutchinson, it turns out, was at the leading edge of a major trend. The number of courses on environmental literature continues to grow, as students and scholars alike explore the idea that humanistic inquiry can and should have something to say about the environmental crisis.

Just this year, Cornell has launched a new cross-college major, called Environment and Sustainability, which bridges the divide between the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the College of Arts and Sciences. It includes an Environmental Humanities concentration. In its first year, this major has already drawn 400 students.

Sachi Rai, a junior majoring in Environment and Sustainability, has taken courses called “Writing the Environment,” “Literature and the Elements of Nature,” and “Environmental Humanities: Theories and Methods.” Rai is drawn to the ways literature courses provide fresh lenses for thinking through environmental issues. A lot of her other courses deal with current events, making it easy to get bogged down in historical and current cases. But the creative texts Rai encounters in these courses, she says, often make “more hopeful” statements about environmental futures than those iterated in the sciences and social sciences, something she finds encouraging and inspiring in the midst of the uphill battle towards environmental sustainability.

Roger Gilbert, a professor of American poetry, notes that it’s too easy to think of environmentalism as a concern for our own times: “Various scholars are showing how it is relevant in other periods and fields.” From Chaucer’s concept of nature to Sylvia Plath’s “Mushrooms,” a vast archive of literary texts is fodder for the emerging field of ecocriticism. The Department’s newest faculty member, Chelsea Frazier, writes about the ways that African and African-American woman writers and artists approach the problem of environmentalism.

But the creative texts Rai encounters in these courses, she says, are not easy to get bogged down in historical and current cases. “We need people to capture the imagination.” Professor Hutchinson’s course is one step in. Equipped with both a scientific background and the communicative, interpretive skills fostered in English, students should have something to say about the environmental crisis.

Junior Natalie Monticello, an Environment and Sustainability major, says that she has come to see the urgent need for literary study. “There’s a lot of good science out there—that’s not the issue. The problems are political, they’re social, they have to do with the public imagination.”

That’s where students like Rai and Monticello can one day step in. Equipped with both a scientific background and the communicative, interpretive skills fostered in English and other environmental humanities courses, these graduates will be well-positioned to influence contemporary policies surrounding the environment. “These are the people we need to communicate the science,” Professor Hutchinson says. “We need people to capture the imagination.”

In Memoriam James McConkey
1921 - 2019

McConkey helped found the Cornell Council for the Arts in 1965, and initiated the popular Mind and Memory course, exploring creativity across various disciplines. A former student established a summer fellowship in creative writing in McConkey’s name in 2008. His collected papers (1948-90) are housed in Cornell University Library’s Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections.

McConkey was nothing that was joining these together, so I decided to give up creating characters and write about his own experiences,” colleague Robert Morgan said. Known for his meditative nonfiction, McConkey created imagery sparked by memory, making intuitive connections as he wrote. His essays often were about himself or his family.

“Memory is a fiction, but it’s a fiction that’s true to us,” McConkey said in 2004.

He avoided the term “memoirist” and preferred to call his work “life writing.”

McConkey began publishing fiction in the mid-1950s and experimented with autobiographical fiction into the mid-1960s, until he decided to give up creating characters and write about his own experiences, colleague Robert Morgan said. Known for his meditative nonfiction, McConkey created imagery sparked by memory, making intuitive connections as he wrote. His essays often were about himself or his family.

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McConkey joined the Department of English in the College of Arts and Sciences in 1956 as an assistant professor, and retired in 1982. He taught modern literature and prose, creative writing courses in poetry and fiction, and modern British and American fiction; and was an adviser at Epoch magazine.

He was faculty adviser to some leading literary figures, including Thomas Pynchon ’59, screenwriter David Seidler ’59, fiction writers Joanna Russ ’57, Richard Fariña ’59, Lorrie Moore, MFA ’82, and memoirist and fiction writer A. Manette Ansary ’91. He also mentored Julie Schumacher (1986), Paul Cody (1987), Melissa Bank (1988), Stewart O’Nan (1992), Junot Diaz and Susan Choi (1995), and Nina Revoyr (1997).
Senior Spotlight
Three senior English majors reflect on their Cornell English experience

Tell me a little about yourself. Where are you from? What’s your Cornell story, and how does literature play a part in that?

Jenny Xie: I am from Wyomissing, Pennsylvania although all of my extended family still lives in various parts of China. Having lived in small suburban areas my whole life, literature first provided me a sense of escape as a child, and now it is a method for understanding reality as opposed to escaping it.

Peter Szilagyi: I grew up outside of Denver, CO. I came to Cornell partly because I wanted to study literature somewhere where I could also study something along the lines of agriculture or plant sciences.

Alana Sullivan: I am from Southeastern Michigan. I’ve always loved reading and thinking about books and stories and poetry, but I think I primarily considered literature as a means of escape, or a way of “checking out” of this world for a while to spend time thinking and moving around in a different one. Since coming to Cornell and pursuing the English major, however, learning from and with my peers and instructors in the English department has pretty significantly changed my relationship to reading and literature. Now, I view reading, writing, and discussing literature not as solitary activities or lovely ways to pass time, but as having immense and unique potential to connect individuals across time, location, space, ideologies, and communities, as well as to create and support existing communities.

When did you decide to be an English major? Was there a certain moment or experience when you “knew”?

Jenny: I’m not actually sure that I’ve ever had an “ah-ha” moment. English and literature were always things that worked for me throughout school, so when it came time to apply it felt like the natural choice and I’ve just stuck with it since. I did have a lot of disagreements with family members (they’ve come around since then!) about my choice of major when applying, and I do think that point of conflict actually helped solidify my choice.

Peter: I actually didn’t decide to be an English major until the day before my junior year began. I came to Cornell planning to study comparative literature, actually, and really hit the ground running in the humanities my freshman year. Then I panicked and transferred to CALS and studied plant sciences as a major for a full year because I knew I cared about the biological sciences too and studying the humanities was a personal upheaval in ways for which, looking back, I’m grateful but for which I was not then prepared. I loved the plant sciences, but that year let me realize that literature was what I really needed to be studying. I make decisions at a snail’s pace, though, so it took me all summer after sophomore year really to be confident in that decision. In that time, I realized that the English department was the best place to pursue my specific literary interests.

Alana: I think I knew pretty early on, when I found myself vainly attempting to see if there were any English courses that I could fake into counting as fulfilling the Arts and Sciences math and physical sciences distribution requirements, since I simply couldn’t bear the idea of sacrificing space in my schedule that could be taken up by an English course for a math or biology course. Unfortunately, while English courses are cross-listed with many other departments, statistics is not one of them.

What has been the most memorable English course you’ve taken at Cornell?

Jenny: I think there are actually two: “Intro to Asian American Literature” and “Race and the University.” Professor Shelley Wong is great at asking pointed questions, and I think I developed a lot as a reader in that course. “Race and the University” I took my junior spring, and it was an important point of comparison to mark my academic journey. I was able to see how much I had developed in my knowledge and reading ability, and also in my critique of academia.

Peter: That’s a really hard question, but I think Professor Greg Londe’s “Stein and Yeats” course did a lot to shape my current research interests and methods, so that’s a definite contender. I’m taking a course called “Quantification” with Dr. Joan Lubin right now that might be a strong contender as well. The digital humanities and the application of computational methods to literary studies really excite me, and I’m thrilled finally to be taking a class that is, at least partly, explicitly an introduction to that subfield.

Alana: Without hesitation, the course “Race and Gender in the Middle Ages” taught by the incomparable Prof. Masha Raskolnikov has continued to profoundly shape the way I think about academia, its relationship to current social justice activism, particularly around racial prejudice and violence. It challenged my understanding and views of the modern West’s often disavowed relationship to its pre-modern self, and discussions in that class led to the deepest and most critical thinking, self-reflection, reading, researching and writing I’ve done so far in college. What will you take with you that you learned or encountered during your major?

Alana: The instructors and classmates I’ve encountered while pursuing the English major at Cornell have shaped my ability to look closely and critically at the world around me, to understand and communicate my own ideas and thoughts, and to hear and understand those of others. My time in the English department has helped me develop the skills necessary to take and give useful and constructive feedback, to draw deeper, more subtle connections between people, ideas, places, and times, and to think seriously about what my role has been in the suppression of marginalized voices and stories, and what I’d like it to be in the future.

Where do you plan to go from here?

Jenny: I will be looking for work in the labor movement and unions, but at some point I plan on returning to school. And regardless of my career or salaried work, I will be focused on community and political organizing in my personal time.

Peter: I would really like to get my MFA in poetry, but I want to take a couple years off first. I’m trying with trying to work in publishing during that time, but I haven’t committed to anything yet.

Alana: Yikes! A tough question. I might have to pass on this one, for now. . .
In 1971, a twenty-seven-year old Bob Morgan was invited to teach creative writing and poetry at Cornell University. “I was told the job would last for nine months,” Morgan said on October 3, 2019. This day marked the writer’s 75th birthday, and in Morgan’s honor, the English Department hosted an all-day celebration we called MorganFest. It’s now forty-eight years since he arrived at Cornell, and Robert Morgan, thank goodness, hasn’t gone anywhere.

Morgan was born in 1944 in Hendersonville, North Carolina. Hendersonville is a small town nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, a setting similar to those found in his work. Though encouraged to study mathematics and science in his youth, Morgan was drawn to the arts.

While attending N.C. State, Morgan dove into what he described as “the excitement about poetry in the 1960s,” making connections with friends and mentors, poets and teachers. After graduating, he continued to write poetry with the support of friends and publishers at Lillabulero magazine. And then came the publication of his first book of poems, Zirconia. It was that book that prompted the call from Cornell.

What is Morgan most famous for? It depends on whom you ask. In some circles, he is the acclaimed author of Gap Creek (1999), a novel that follows a newlywed couple, Julie and Hank, as they survive the hardships of everyday life in the southern Appalachian Mountains at the turn of the twentieth century. Oprah Winfrey chose it for her Book Club in 2000. Other readers will think of Robert Morgan first as a prolific and brilliant poet, author of Zirconia Poems (1969), At the Edge of Orchard County (1987), and Dark Energy (2015), along with ten other collections.

The afternoon portion of Morganfest featured readings by alumnus poets Elizabeth Holmes and Lynn Powell, and author and artist Robert Schultz. Robert Morgan then read from his own work. Please see the back inside cover of this newsletter to read his original poem, Terroir.

Robert Morgan is an institution. His faculty colleagues adore him; his students come away transformed; and even the world of critics is brimful with praise. “His stripped-down and almost primitive sentences burn with the raw, lonesome pathos of Hank Williams’s best songs,” says the New York Times Book Review. If you don’t know his work already, we can’t recommend it highly enough. The only problem is where to start. There are nine books of fiction—all characterized by gripping storytelling and rich, rounded protagonists—and fourteen volumes of taut, precise and haunting poetry.

Morgan’s work many times before,” one panelist said, “but never with him sitting in the room.”

The very nature of art is about reaching across boundaries by empathy.”

Now a three-time recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts, a Guggenheim fellow, a Rockefeller Foundation fellow, Morgan has a list of prestigious awards and publications so long that we can only begin to hint at his literary achievements.

After the morning panels, Alice Fulton led a Q&A session with Kenneth McClane and Randall Kenan. They focused on Morgan’s latest novel, Chasing the North Star (2016), which tells the tale of two runaway slaves from the slaves’ perspectives. When Morgan was asked if he could speak to his decision to write from outside his race, Morgan said, “The very nature of art is about reaching across boundaries by empathy.”
The English Department welcomes these fantastic new hires

**Derrick Spires**  
Associate Professor of English

Spires specializes in early African-American and American print culture, citizenship studies and black speculative fiction. He is the author of The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019). Theoretically sophisticated and meticulously researched, this book argues against conventional readings of African-American writing in the nineteenth century as reacting to the stripping of rights from African-Americans by US laws and institutions. Black writers of the period did not accept the premise that states make citizens, Spires shows us: instead, they made the case that “active and involved individuals and collectives create citizens.” This book shows how African-American writers theorized a whole range of acts of participation in the collective as citizenship—from writing political articles and holding conventions to care for sick neighbors and greeting others in the street. And in the very act of defining what it meant to be citizens in public and in private, “Black Aesthetics in the Long Nineteenth Century.”

**Chelsea Frazier**  
Faculty Fellow

Frazier received her MA and PhD from the Department of African-American Studies at Northwestern University. She has a Master of Arts from the American Studies program at Purdue University, and a Bachelor of Arts from the Department of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Barnard College. She is bringing a whole new slate of courses to Cornell English. “I will be teaching courses that engage contemporary Black literature and art to explore themes of race, gender, and ecology. I’m especially energized to teach my ‘Octavia Butler’ course which will delve deeply into her full catalog of written work.” Frazier is working on a book-length ecocritical study of contemporary Black women artists, writers, and activists. When asked how she came to connect Black feminists to environmental studies, she says: “the work of Black women writers and essayists writing about ‘nature’ largely inspired my research. Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Octavia Butler, for example, masterfully integrate environmental literature and Black feminist critique into gripping narratives. They inspired me to investigate how they and others accomplished those marvelous feats.” Frazier explores a “Black feminist eco-esthetic” that has been largely overlooked in environmental studies.

**Emily Fridlund**  
Assistant Professor of Creative Writing

Fridlund did her MFA in fiction at Washington University in Saint Louis and her PhD in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California. She is the author of Calispul, a collection of short stories, and History of Wolves, a novel. Since her two books appeared in 2017, Fridlund says, she has been “humbled by the brief moments of connection, strangers who reached out and said the books meant something to them.” But some things remain the same. “Making sentences is still unpredictable — sometimes discouraging, sometimes joyful — work for me, the same as it always has been.” We asked her about the book she’s writing now. “The project I’m currently working on was a novel first, collapsed into a story for a while, and has grown back into a novel-looking thing again. It seems to be about parent-hood and grief, perhaps a changeling.”

She really lit up when we got her talking about teaching. “I love so many things about teaching. One of the most wonderful is the ongoing experience of being another writer in a classroom of writers. Writing is hard, and it can be lonely. Not only can we all learn from each other, but I love the way that the semester builds these profound and ephemeral communities over and over again, castles in the sand, places for us all — myself included — to make discoveries, to commiserate, and to feel galvanized by the delicious new work being made by others in the class.”

**Nafissa Thompson-Spires**  
Richards Family Assistant Professor of English

Thompson-Spires will be teaching fiction writing to graduate and undergraduate students. She is bringing a whole new slate of courses to Cornell English. “I will be teaching courses that engage contemporary Black literature and art to explore themes of race, gender, and ecology. I’m especially energized to teach my ‘Octavia Butler’ course which will delve deeply into her full catalog of written work.” Thompson-Spires will be teaching fiction writing to graduate and undergraduate students.

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**Alumni Interactive**

english_dept@cornell.edu and @englishcornell

Which English professor was the most influential for you during your Cornell Experience? Which faculty have you kept in touch with since you’ve graduated and why?

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**English Faculty Retirements**

Barbara Correll  
Associate Professor  

Jonathan D. Culler  
Class of 1916 Professor  

Stuart Davis  
Senior Lecturer & Weiss Provost’s Teaching Fellow  

Paul Sawyer  
Professor & Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellow  
"What are you reading?"

Chi Kye Lee
Undergraduate English Major
I grew up in Seoul. One could call me a “late bloomer” in that I officially became an English major at the end of my sophomore year.

I always read a few books at the same time. I have Thom Gunn’s New Selected Poems and Guapa by Saleem Haddad in my backpack at the moment. I really like to read at Cafe Jennie in Cornell Store, which has great lighting!

Saki Wang
Undergraduate English Major
I’m from Shanghai, China. I started out as an information science major. Yet, taking a creative writing class in my sophomore year changed everything. The process of writing sometimes even surprises me. It magically reveals things that I don’t know about myself.

I am currently reading Borges’ This Craft of Verse, something that I picked up on my own. Letters to a Young Poet by Rilke has been a life-changing book for me. I really recommend it to everyone. I give it out as gift books to lots of my friends, too. Full of great life advice.

I like to read on trains or cars or metros. In Djuna Barnes’ Nightwood, a book I read for my Reading for Writers class, a line went, “I’ve always wanted to be in two places at once.” By reading on my way from one point to another, I slip into a different world. I undergo both a mental and physical feeling of moving, of keeping going, of leaving and also arriving.

Kathryn Diaz
Second Year MFA Graduate Student
I think one of the single greatest gifts we have in this existence is the ability to give shape to the wildest abstract secrets with nothing more sophisticated than the alphabet we learned in kindergarten. It’s one of the most human things we can do, to write in a way that reveals ourselves to others. And thus writing can, or should, belong to everybody.


Professor Helena Viramontes,
Director of Creative Writing Program
I’m almost finished with Michael Wex’s Born to Kvetch and Steven Weisman’s The Chosen Wars. Both readings help me imagine a Jewish character in my work-in-progress The Cemetery Boys. I am also writing about Boyle Heights, at one time a thriving Jewish community in East Los Angeles up until the ’70s. I try to research as much as I can so has to give my self permission to write outside my religious, gender, and cultural experiences without panicking. Just picked up Sherman Alexie’s Blasphemy fiction collection for bedtime reading, but mostly I like reading biographies at night.

For our graduate fiction course, I am re-reading Charles Baxter’s SubText—Beyond Plot. I love reading his critical essays on fiction, and, because the book has helped me develop important scenes in my work, I wanted to share it with our MFA students.

Ray Jayawardhana,
Dean of Arts and Sciences
I grew up in Sri Lanka and came to the US for college. I read a lot as a kid. I remember my father taking me to an annual book sale at one of the biggest book stores in Colombo every September, and coming home with dozens and dozens of books.

I just finished listening to Andrew Roberts’ recent biography of Churchill as an audiobook. Last fiction book I read was Salvage the Bones by Jesmyn Ward. Slaughterhouse-Five is next on the list.

Terroir
That quality that seems unique, as thriving from a special spot of soil, air flow and light specific, and also frost and winter sleep, conditions of particular year, as every instance comes just once with mix of mineral and grease, what Hopkins chose to call inscape, or individuation, sounds so close to terror you’d confuse the two, as if the finest and the rarest blend would come with just a hint of fear or pain, the sting and shiver of revulsion with the savor of the earth and sun, of this once, not returning, sung for this one ear, on this one tongue.