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English Department

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Talking Film

Quentin Miller takes his turn at the mic during a post-screening panel discussion about *James Baldwin Abroad*, a collection of three short films directed by Sadat Pakay, Terrence Dixon, and Horace Ové. The screening and talk was held at Coolidge Corner Cinema on March 29.

From left: David Leeming (Professor Emeritus at UConn, also Baldwin’s personal secretary and official biographer), Miller, Jesse McCarthy (Harvard), and Kimberly McLarin (Emerson).

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Public and Professional Writing minor approved

The Suffolk English Department’s Public and Professional Writing (PPW) minor has reached final approval, joining existing options for minoring in English and Creative Writing (CW). Students majoring in English can choose concentrations in Literature, CW, or PPW. Check [here](https://dc.suffolk.edu/syntax/) for details.

English classes of all flavors are worthy and valuable on their own, but the language, communication, analytical, ethical, critical thinking, storytelling, contextual and situational awareness skills, and the underpinning theories across all three tracks pair well with any other discipline, making it an excellent, practical choice as a minor or second major. Click [here](https://dc.suffolk.edu/syntax/) to search the list of upcoming classes.

Every profession has its own landscape of complex and challenging rhetorical situations. Participating in civilization presents minefields of overwhelming information and opinions, often of questionable validity and intent. English courses offer ways students can navigate them.

PPW courses build on the rhetoric-focused foundations established in First-Year Writing courses, emphasizing the ways meanings are made across different contexts and how students can use words toward their own purposes.

CW workshops get students thinking and like creators and storytellers as well as scholars, studying craft techniques and writing original works of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

Lit courses train in aesthetics but also in close reading and interpreting stories in historical, cultural, and theoretical contexts. Through that, students develop awareness of the broader world and the tools to engage with it.

Courses in editing, publishing, and career readiness offer explicit professionalization, as do field-focused internships and other opportunities.
A final dispatch from outgoing department chair, Quentin Miller

“What an adorable little boy! What do you want to be when you grow up?” Bespectacled and cloyingly perfumed, Aunt Gladys from Omaha pinched my four-year-old cheeks and leaned closer. I panicked a little. I was supposed to say, “Astronaut!” or “Shortstop for the Red Sox!” or “President!” but I was fixated on naming the thing that every little boy truly wants to be but dares not name. The urge was strong, though, and I was a bold little boy who was not going to hide his ambition. The elderly woman blinked and glanced at my mother, who looked nervous. Her eyes warned me: Don’t say it. I swallowed. Dare I? I blurted, “Chair of an English department!”

Okay, I’m joking! But you knew that: no kid wants to be department chair. In fact, no college-bound teen wants to be department chair, nor does any college student. In graduate school one gets a vague sense of the way colleges and universities are structured, but even when I was toiling toward my Ph.D. it never once occurred to me that I might someday be chair. Let me speak for my ilk: we became professors because one day, probably around our junior year in college, we thought it’d be mighty cool to lead a class discussion about the stuff we found fascinating. We didn’t realize that the role of a faculty member entailed more than teaching. In case this is news to readers, we’re also expected to conduct and publish research, to serve on committees, to advise students, to shape our institution’s curriculum, etc. etc. etc. We learned none of this while studying Keats or Wharton.

In our graduate classrooms, we were trained in the life of the mind. Everything else we learned about our profession would come later.

What have I learned? That’s what Stephen King wanted to know when he interviewed me in April to discuss the end of my seven-year term as chair, a term bifurcated by Bryan Trabold who, in a hostile takeover, seized the role for three years between 2018 and 2021 before being discovered hunched over in front of Sargent Hall, rocking back and forth and babbling wildly about the differences between goals and objectives.

King approached me in my palatial second home on Nantucket on a lovely spring day. We sipped a refreshing mocktail made with imported spring water and wild local herbs, served in beaded martini glasses by my butler Clive (who’s actually British) and nibbled on shrimp toasts. Here’s an excerpt:

**SK:** Lovely view. How’d you find this place?

**QM:** Well, it kind of found me. I was tired of my second home in Bar Harbor – you know, where you and I met – and I just heard this modest little shack calling across the waves. “Buy me!” it called. “Use your chair stipend and buy me!”

**SK:** I see. Let’s get to it: What did you learn as department chair?

**QM:** I’ve learned that a broken clock is right twice a day, and you can’t make a drunk horse jump over a wino.

**SK:** Um, the first is a cliché and the second doesn’t make sense.

**QM:** (points emphatically at Stephen King’s chest) EXACTLY.

**SK:** Would you say you’re older? Wiser?

**QM:** Yes and no, in that order.

**SK:** Did the job cut into your writing time?

**QM:** I’m sure everyone has an excuse to write less.

**SK:** Um….

**QM:** (rolls eyes) Present company excepted, of course.

**SK:** Well, we’re not here to talk about me. What are the benefits of being chair?

**QM:** (gestures toward the ocean in a sweeping arc) An oceanside home on Nantucket without a neighbor in sight. (Snapping his fingers): Clive, would you be so kind as to refresh our mocktails?

**SK:** Clearly a perk. Why wouldn’t everyone want to be chair?

**QM:** Well, Stephen, it’s not all second homes and butlers. You have to write a lot of emails. You have to read a lot of emails. You have to… (bites his lower lip and turns aside)

**SK:** (pats Quentin’s knee) I’m sorry to have brought up email.

**QM:** (shakes his head, eyes welling as he stares at the ocean) Let’s move on.

**SK:** Despite the obvious benefits of the role, you must be looking forward to returning to faculty full time.

**QM:** (nodding, composed again): Yes, yes, of course.

**SK:** Because…

**QM:** Well, Stephen, this crown gets a little heavy. You get tired of signing autographs. The camera flashbulbs have taken a toll on my eyes. You can’t order a meatball sub without rumors of your declining diet hitting the tabloids. I’m looking forward to just being an average Joe again.

**SK:** And to less… (sees his mistake, blunders on anyway)...email?

**QM:** (stands abruptly) I think we’re done here.

—Quentin Miller

No Stephen Kings were actually fed mocktails in the making of this story, and the above cake was not part of a live performance of Thinner. It was in recognition of Quentin Miller’s final department meeting as chair on April 13.
Amy Monticello will chair English for 3-year term

When current English Chair Quentin Miller's term ends on June 30, Amy Monticello will take over for a now-standard term of three years.

Having designed nine new and distinct classes across all three English concentrations, First-Year Seminar, and Creativity and Innovation since she arrived in 2014, and with a background in First-Year Writing, she brings broad teaching experience and a well-informed, collaborative pedagogical and curricular vision. She builds dedicated relationships with students, and was recently voted the Student Government Association's Outstanding CAS Faculty Member of the Year.

In announcing that she'd appointed Monticello as the next chair, CAS Dean Edie Sparks wrote, "I believe her experience with the First Year Seminar program—as a problem solver and idea leader—as well as her work with faculty across CAS in service of our students during their most important semester—their first—prepares her well to be an effective chair for the department. She has a clear-eyed focus on our students and a strong and steady voice in support of student-centered change."

A creative nonfiction specialist, Monticello has also published significantly in scholarly and professional genres. Her extensive service throughout her time at Suffolk—including on the Educational Policy Committee and the Promotions, Tenure, and Review Committee—has given her a deep understanding of the institution, and enabled her to build professional relationships among colleagues across the university. These, along with leadership models set by those who came before, like Miller and fellow former chair Bryan Trabold, she said "would all inform how I draw on our strengths, advocate for the importance, resonance, and versatility of our disciplines, and represent the English Department in our wider Suffolk community."

She brings administrative and budgetary experience, having served as director of the First-Year Seminar program since 2018 (a role that will end on June 30).

While it’s become a fad to throw around the term “interdisciplinary” as a way to convince fewer people to do more work in areas outside their expertise, that approach is better described as “antidisciplinary.” This is not how Monticello uses it.

In her chair candidacy statement, she wrote, "For me, true interdisciplinarity is built on respect for disciplinarity—an understanding that solving complex problems requires distinct perspectives in dialogue. Because the study of literature and writing engages with complex issues through language, storytelling, analysis, and theoretical and historical frameworks, our courses already add value to a variety of existing interdisciplinary programs. But while we preserve traditional pathways toward degrees, we have also begun to think about non-traditional pathways... As someone whose teaching sits at the intersection of our disciplinary quadrants—first-year writing, creative writing, literature, and public and professional writing—I value their distinct contributions and believe in their cross-disciplinary potential."

As we navigate the changes in the world and in what our students need, much of our strength as a field lies in the ways English cannot replace any other field, but the ways in which it connects to all of them.

English Honors Thesis Presentations

Three English majors presented their honors theses on April 20. Mack Brown's "Intersectional Indigeneity: Native American Women's Power and Authority in Tracks and The Legacy of Lucy Little Bear" was advised by Leslie Eckel. Lauren Pichette's "Bending Gender with Genre" was advised by Amy Monticello. Elizabeth DiLauro's, "Consenting Women and Powerful Men: Consent and Female Autonomy in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice" was advised by Hannah Hudson. From left, Monticello, Eckel, Hudson, DiLauro, Brown, and Pichette.
Beardmore publishes first poetry chapbook

Suffolk rising senior Rose Beardmore’s poetry chapbook, *Orchard*, was published in April by Bottlecap Press. Its 15 poems form a collage exploring romantic relationships, family, self, and growth. There is sex, but the focus is on intimacy. There are repeated apples and horses.

"I had been using a lot of these apple, consuming metaphors for like a year," she said. "I loved this idea of your emotional self being this like hopeless animalistic creature that doesn’t really understand what it’s doing."

Bookended by the poems "Secretariat" and "Secretariat Returns," it is framed by the tension, the inseparability of what we find nourishing and what we find painful in one another.

"In Secretariat Returns,’ it comes back to where the collection started, but with a different conclusion," she said. "The first one is like we have relationships with parents that are super complicated, but once you get into romance as an adult it’s about ‘How do I process closeness and intimacy? It’s a flawed theory that people are put here to hurt each other. We can appreciate closeness and intimacy while acknowledging that those things can hurt an awful lot. At the end, it’s about the acceptance of being hurt."

Like much poetry, it is autobiographical, which also raises questions about how to write about the lives of other people that get tangled up with our own.

"In the first draft, there were names and places," she said. "When it was accepted, I was like, ‘Oh no, we cannot put this out there with names and places!’ Not that they’d feel bad about it, but it’s more like respecting other people’s privacy."

She contacted a few people to let them know. They’ve respected the work and Beardmore’s right to do it. She was particularly concerned with how her mother would respond.

"I gave her a copy and crossed out poems I didn’t want her to read," she said. "She didn’t skip those. I wasn’t happy with that, but she still appreciated the way I handled those moments in the poems. Growing up, I was taught that you should feel your feelings as hard as you can and then talk about them with the people you need to talk about them with."

*Orchard* captures Beardmore’s experience at a life stage when we move from young adult to actual adult. In the poem "Pleasant Street, she references the mental illness she and her mother share:

The house eats us whole
both in red leather blazers and mirrored hysterics,
clawing our way out and back in.
We have the map, we turn it upside down—
it looks nicer this way!
like the rug under the couch, the mania in the morning
I do my best to make sure nobody sees—
a learned behavior, a courtesy.

"It’s about how I’m mentally ill the same way my mom is mentally ill," she said, describing how this implicitly plays out throughout the collection. "It’s making this giant adjustment when getting into actual relationships. There’s an overcorrection that happens. I thought ‘I can’t say everything; it’s too much.’ So when I find somebody that really likes me, it’s like I can’t say anything."

A double major in English and theater, Beardmore transferred to Suffolk as a sophomore, having previously established her creative identity exclusively in theater. She’d always been a reader, but pandemic solitude brought her back to reading as voraciously as she did at ages 7-10. At Suffolk, wanting to find community outside theater, and having long been interested in writing, she took to her mother’s advice that, "if you want to be great, you have to study the people who were great before you." So she took Nick Frangipane’s honors ENG 150 course in Mysteries, and quickly declared herself an English major.

"It was incredible," she said. "I had never read a single mystery until that class, but then was a total mystery buff for the next three months after it. It was a very Socratic seminar, and the discussion-heavy pedagogy of that class gave me a role to play. It was amazing... I realized you can have more than one passion and they can intersect in different ways and make you money in different ways. ‘They embolden other each in complementary ways. I don’t think my theater work would be as good without the literary work, and the theater work feeds the literary work."

*Orchard* started as an honors project for Amy Monticello’s ENG 376 Literary Publishing class. She’d had most of the poems written, but had never thought to submit them as a collection.

"That class changed my idea of the framework of publishing," she said. "I always saw both writing and publishing as solitary things, but the more I learn, the more I see that it’s all about community."

Of course, submitting, just like auditioning, also means handling rejection, and celebrating specific, personalized rejections themselves as rare wins.

"I had this ‘expect nothing’ mentality," she said. "I was really excited putting my work in a place where professional eyes could be on it, even if it wasn’t getting a lot of feedback. Like acting, it’s an endurance sport. Don’t take it personally if you’re not getting the attention you want."

A small independent press, Bottlecap didn’t have a reading fee, and is very fast moving, especially with chapbooks. The features subsection of the press publishes little collections like this. Beardmore received an offer within a week of submitting. But a small press doesn’t have resources for marketing, distribution, and promotion, so authors have to do that.

"It is cool to have total control of marketing my own work," she said. "When I first used Instagram to promote it, I used a string of emojis. Then people started using those emojis back to me, and I was like ‘Oh yeah. This is branding. This is how branding works.’"

*Orchard* is available directly from Bottlecap Press.
Brief Interviews with English Alums
Scott Kayhan, BA 2018, English and Art History

STX: Describe your career since Suffolk.

SK: I moved to New York without any job prospects, which was pretty gutsy and a little naive. But just as things began to look bleak, a recruiter reached out to me via Indeed and I got a job as a marketing coordinator at Beyer Blinder Belle Architects, a firm specializing in historic preservation.

At first, I was nervous that it would require a marketing knowledge and proficiency in software I wasn’t familiar with, but most of those skills I learned during the job. I had a great team that supported me as I grew more familiar with the workplace.

I was let go after a year because of the pandemic, and I started reevaluating my career. I began working as a freelance graphic designer, which I enjoyed. I designed graphics for a clothing brand in L.A. Working remotely allowed me to travel towards the end of COVID. I spent 6 months in Spain and Argentina in 2021. Once I got a taste of a more nomadic lifestyle and doing something creatively fulfilling, I had a better idea about the career direction I wanted.

I returned to New York and needed another job with better pay. As fun as my freelance work was, I wasn’t making enough to support myself. I reached out to the recruiter again and got my current job at another architecture firm, a more avant-garde, design-y firm, building mostly public space projects with roots in the art world.

It is interesting to see architecture being thought of in a more artistic way, beyond creating functional spaces for offices or residences. Despite where I am, I intend to leave architecture to seek something more personally fulfilling and artistic.

I’m saving so that I can take a few months off and learn UI/UX Design via bootcamp. This has worked well for people I know who’ve opted for a fast-paced, intense learning environment. In today’s world, career changes are far more common than they might have been for our parents. I urge students not to worry too much whether they’re making “the right” career moves so early in their professional development.

STX: How has your work/degree in English helped you professionally?

SK: A double major in English and Art History was deeply rewarding. I loved how they complemented each other. I crafted my senior thesis to accommodate them both because they were so synergistic. They each taught me different ways of seeing the world. In your coursework in English, you learn how different people think about the world around them. You get to spend time in the heads of great thinkers. Through Art History, I learned to think deeper about what I saw in the physical world. Coupling these two modes it gave me an immense curiosity about how the world works and the reality we live in. It is endlessly rewarding to see the world in new ways, and I have my studies to thank for that.

Aside from a more philosophical attitude, being able to manipulate language is a critical skill in the workforce. My day-to-day deals a lot with tailoring language for specific pursuits. The skills I developed in both reading and writing have been invaluable to my daily responsibilities in the workplace. Not only is writing well a crucial skill, but reading well is just as important. I would encourage students to continue reading whatever they can, whether it’s articles, short stories, or books. The skills you’ve developed as a student need to be maintained. Reading will keep the skills you’ve spent so much time and money developing agile and sharp.

STX: What advice can you offer students interested in English?

SK: Being a strong writer and communicator will take you far on any path you choose. It’s not necessarily the first thing people think of when they’re listing their skills on a resume, but I’ve found that great writing is not at all a common skill in the professional world. My English degree has taught me a lot about communication and the power that words possess. If you can use language effectively, you’re already well-equipped for the ‘real world’ and more professionally skilled than you might think.

STX: What advice do you have for current English majors as they think about life after college?

Set more short-term goals than distant, bigger goals. As we enter the workforce, we’re too often pressured to have goals 5-10 years down the line. That is a very long time, and as we’ve learned from the pandemic, there are things that you don’t see coming and can’t plan for. You need to be able to adapt and roll with the punches. Life will throw a lot of hurdles your way, no matter how much you prepare for what might happen.

Be content with the little accomplishments and less-drastic progress you make, because if you rest all of your hope and self-worth on the most monumental achievements, you will miss so much fulfillment and joy along the way.

Don’t get too caught up with the big picture, set realistic expectations for yourself, and learn to not compare yourself to others. Everyone is in their own little world and the reality that they’ve created for themselves in one way or another, and it’s up to you to make yours the best it can be.

STX: Describe something you learned the hard way.

A lot of the skills I’ve learned in my career have been while doing the job itself. I’ve found that much of the time, when learning something new, trial-by-fire can feel arduous and uncomfortable, like a rite of passage. There will be times in your careers that you will feel overwhelmed, burned out, and discouraged. As long as you don’t feel this way all the time, know that it is a normal step on the path to growth and progress.
Class Profile: ENG 430

Literature of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars

History and literature intersect. Historians make narratives, explain cause and effect, connect the present to the past, see how all that is arises from all that was. History is plot. Literature is how history feels.

Literature gives us a point of view that does the feeling, their ways of doing the thinking, and their motivations to do the telling. In that act of empathy, of vicariously occupying another’s experience, we are made wiser, larger, more complex when we return to ourselves afterwards. We become different. Then the world looks different. Next comes intellectual analysis, synthesis with other perspectives and sources, the fuller, ongoing broadening of how we understand the world and how to live in it.

That’s the experience of any good lit class, and certainly in Bryan Trabold’s “Literature of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars,” not least for how little history students tend to carry into it.

Trabold found that most students have had only a day or two of exposure to the Vietnam War in high school, and no instruction at all on the Iraq war. And so, before there can be literature, there must be at least some history.

Students are shocked and often angry when they learn about these wars more deeply: “First, they’re frustrated by what they’re learning for the first time,” he said. “The U.S. and Ho Chi Minh were allies during World War II? The American public was lied to about ‘incidents’ on the Gulf of Tonkin that led congress to grant LBJ power to wage war in Vietnam? We dropped napalm on soldiers and civilians, including children? Saddam Hussein didn’t have weapons of destruction? Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11? When students learn these facts, it’s often overwhelming. Their second frustration: Why didn’t they learn any of this before?”

Peter Davis, director of the documentary Hearts and Minds, (also a text in this course) visited Trabold’s class once. “We flew into both wars on the wings of lies,” Trabold remembers him saying, adding how most Americans had “a profound ignorance of the history and ethnicity of the people” in each country. What we learned from Vietnam kept us out of war for 25 years, Davis argued, but then 9/11 was a “blow to the head” that caused amnesia. We forgot the lessons of Vietnam, he said, when we invaded Iraq.

A good tool to cure ignorance is literature written by people outside that ignorance.

“These wars are seldom given attention in high school, and when they are, they’re told exclusively from American perspectives,” Trabold said. “It’s the same with popular culture. So we begin the Vietnam unit with Vietnamese writers and the Iraq unit with Iraqi writers.”

Exact texts shift each time, since there are so many with so much to say. Students write textual analyses, applying historical and theoretical frameworks. Trabold encourages reading with a feminist lens, noting the representations (or lack thereof) of women by male authors compared to those written by women.

There’s also an experiential assignment. Students research an organization working on a problem created by either war, then write arguments and give presentations about why it deserves support. Many are drawn to those related to Agent Orange, the chemical defoliant the US dropped 16-19 million gallons of on Vietnam during the war that is still causing birth defects and cancer. Several chose these because their own family members died from cancer likely caused by exposure to it during their service. Others focus on PTSD in veterans or support for those who lost family to these wars.

This work is antidote to ignorance, but also to the myth of American exceptionalism.


Students go through a parallel disillusionment. Removing illusions, though, is one of the most important functions of literature.

“It’s not easy teaching this,” Trabold said. “I don’t ’enjoy’ it. But the alternative—not confronting history—is infinitely worse.”

Another myth this literature busts is that awareness is enough, that empathy can stop a war, though such knowledge and identification might be necessary precursors.

“I’d like to think that literature might help prevent similarly disastrous wars in the future,” Trabold said, “but that’s what a lot of people said after Vietnam! There’s of course no guarantee that trying to grapple honestly with the mistakes and violence of the past will have a positive outcome in the future. But if we don’t do so, then there’s almost no hope at all.”

One change he plans for the next version of the course is to have student presentations throughout the semester, rather than only at the end. Otherwise, he said, it’s “too much darkness.” Those aid organizations all work on healing. In that work, in people doing that work at all, there is the expectation and indeed the creation of a future, however uncertain, from a horrible past that literature helps us to know and to carry. And that’s where the hope is.
Readings in Postcolonial Literature

In Peter Jeffreys’s “Readings in Postcolonial Literature” class, students see the shifting currents of history and culture as nations and peoples work to define themselves after an empire’s collapse. The course begins with an Orientalist perspective, then moves into questions of diasporic identities, hybridity, and migration.

“Students identify with these terms because they helped define multiculturalism and diversity as we understand them today,” Jeffreys said. “Postcolonial scholars set up much of our current discourse around ethnicity and nationality.”

Postcolonial authors carry forward shards of national and folkloric discourses shattered by colonialism. In “Imaginary Homelands,” Salman Rushdie uses an analogy of a broken mirror to describe fragmented multicultural inheritance, the incompleteness of history and memory, the ways a nation becomes myth, how the broken mirror enables us to see it all from different angles, each shard offering a different perspective, many of them visible simultaneously. Postcolonial literature shatters the stereotypes that try to define any one place or any one people by any one singular thing.

“I think it’s important for students to read without an identitarian agenda even for themselves,” Jeffreys said. “It’s the imagination that liberates, and these texts are so imaginatively powerful. We talk about so many problematic things, but there’s a joy in how we’re able to see how literature heals people’s imaginations and identities.”

Much of this is about creating communal identity through literature, which is a never-ending effort and involves building new things from pieces of the past, but also questioning those things.

In addition to discussions, presentations, and textual analysis, students visit Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts. But it’s not a desultory stroll. Students interrogate their own enculturated ideas.

“I ask them to go to the African, Asian, and pre-Columbian Mesoamerican galleries and write about artifacts while being conscious of their own aesthetics,” Jeffreys said. “Many confessed they’ve been taught a certain European ideal about what is beautiful, and have to confront their assumptions of art and who defines it. Museums are starting to decolonize themselves, so it’s a great time for this.”

Recent efforts like the MFA returning Benin bronzes raise questions of what right a museum has to such looted treasures, and remind us that many museums have origins in colonialism, built to put an empire’s possessed peoples on public display.

“They get to wander and get lost and then they write incredible essays about making museums more open and diverse, less intimidating and less exclusive, about breaking down barriers between high art, folk art, and popular art,” he said. This comes back to literature: how any canon is selected, by whom, for whom, and from what power structures. Postcolonial literature frequently inverts hierarchies, like who gets to make literature, who gets to be the focus of it, and what narrative expectations readers carry into it.

Nigerian author Ayọbámi Adébáyò gives another view of how the English language works as a cultural construct in a different tradition.

Hanif Kureishi dramatizes the historical divergences common to postcolonial multicultural identity, giving a transgressive depiction of culture, music, relationships, gender, and sexual freedom. Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1981) through politics and folklore, history and national identity, synthesizes many themes of the course.

“His style and approach to fiction is challenging but also magical,” Jeffreys said. “They haven’t seen anything like it. A lot of creative writing students are amazed by Rushdie’s and Kureishi’s style, and by Kureishi’s openness about sexuality. He was ahead of his time in many ways.”

Much postcolonial literature is densely referential to historical events but also to other texts, frequently stretching back into antiquity, blending and talking back to all the varied traditions and influences and traumas that accrued across vast spans of civilization. It can be daunting, but Jeffreys sees students rise to the occasion, not least because they recognize, in these broken-mirror global narratives, the world they are confronting themselves today.

“America is dealing with similar cultural eruptions to the India Rushdie wrote about,” he said. “Christian nationalism, for example. Students realize their own culture isn’t as sanitized as we like to think. Violence and hatred and how people live amongst those things are written into these novels. The migrant condition is a messy one. Assimilation is a messy: America has an idea that we do it better here, but we realize that’s a lie. The fact that Rushdie was stabbed here in the US is an irony. The violence he depicts is in the zeitgeist.”

Though situated in times and places not our students’ own, and though the styles may be radically different from those familiar to them, these works transcend time and distance. Our students too struggle to build a whole future from a broken past. They too struggle with what traditions to keep and what to throw away. They too are swimming in the powerful currents of history.

“Students do so well with these questions and challenges,” Jeffreys said. “It’s so reassuring and liberating for me as an instructor who’s been at this for a long time. Students appreciate the quality of the writing and the beauty of these texts. They’re transgressive, but in an ongoing sense. They’re still relevant and recognizable. They endure.”
Class Profile: ENG 160

School Stories: Narratives of Power and Class

Robin Mangino sends out spies. Okay, not spies exactly, but she does send the students in her "School Stories" literature course on observational missions around Suffolk and at other colleges and universities in the area. They see that these physical and cultural environments are products of things like history and economics, but also that they are rhetorical acts, encoded with deeper ideas about who students are and what education ought to be.

They start by going around Suffolk in small groups, noticing things in context of social class and education. In this semester's class, they returned reporting differences between the Law Library and the Sawyer Library, differences among each building's cafeterias, descriptions of the commuter lounge, bathrooms, the outside spaces between The Common and Samia.

The rest of that class moves from observation to analysis and interpretation, discussing as a group the ways and extent to which these spaces encourage or discourage students to gather, relax, and create community.

In trips farther afield, students noticed Emerson College's spaces that were designed for collaboration among students. At MIT and Harvard, they noticed a lot of tourists, which they felt added noticeable pressure of being in a tourist destination. They described MIT as an open campus, and BU as "pretty locked down." Some reported that Bunker Hill and Bristol Community Colleges appeared more diverse than Suffolk, though had a range of responses as to how diverse Suffolk was relative to each student's prior experiences.

Students write reflections on this field work along with the theory and literary narratives from the class.

"This class asks: what's the connection between social class, education, and American dream?" Mangino said.

"To what extent has education achieved that promise of class mobility?"

Students get foundational ideas about education as an institution, along with some key social and pedagogical theory, such as Paulo Freire's takedown of the "banking model" of education in his influential Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

Mangino also supplies contexts of literary movements and genre differences between fiction and nonfiction, all focused on how literature confronts education's history and practice.

"The central tension is both the power for good and evil in education," Mangino said. "I want them to think about the relationship between the individual and the institution."

This tension is absolutely central to nearly all literature about education, and is forcefully on display in this semester's course readings: Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery (1901), Zitkala-Ša's American Indian Stories (1921), Tsitsi Dangarembga, Nervous Conditions (1988), and J.K. Rowling's, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (1997).

"It allows us to think imaginatively and empathetically about that which is real, which is historical, which is painful, which is tragic," she said. "It allows us a window into the soul of people. What did it mean for a whole formerly enslaved generation to learn to read at the same time? What did it mean for education to be used to erase a child's entire tribal culture? Harry Potter is there at the end as a kind of reward for slogging through the harder texts. But much of it is about eugenics in the modern university, so the conversation still focuses on serious historical and social issues."

Whether occurring in Rhodesia, in post-slavery America, in Native American boarding schools, or in a wealthy elite British boarding school reimagined for the wizarding world, education's ties to class hierarchies, social inequality, and colonialism are readily apparent. Which is to say that every institution embodies the ideas of the people who built it.

"Washington advocated for vocational education, in contrast to the professional/academic education advocated by W.E.B. DuBois," Mangino said. "The context of that point in American history is different, but students generally agreed that today there should be more diversity in the types of programming available in all high schools, that we should invest money and space so they can have more choice in designing their own educations, and in assembling something that works for them individually. That works against the narrow expectations a given institution might have, no matter what those expectations are. One of my students went to a vocational/technical high school. She is getting a college degree, but also is grateful for the cooking skills she gained in those programs in high school."

Students write personal analytical essays about some piece of their own educational history, sometimes interviewing family members and other elders, all with an eye towards situating their individual experiences within the broader contexts the other course material helps them see.

For their final projects, they synthesize readings from the course with some research they do independently, which might focus on analyzing further literary works, but might instead return to their personal experiences, interviews, analysis of current educational issues and discourses, or any other thing the student can pitch as an on-topic research question worth pursuing.

"They're experts on it as well," Mangino said. "The way that this generation talks about mental health and wellness and its relationship to education and performance... there really wasn't that language in my generation. They're bringing a lot of that language to their analysis."
Contract grading in writing, rhetoric, and literature classes

Teachers use grades to incentivize student behavior. It’s one motivation, but it’s entirely extrinsic to whatever activity is being assessed. Rewards and punishments. Carrots and sticks.

Much has been said about the benefits and limitations to traditional grading models, but the complexity of what happens in writing and literature classes makes our approaches to grading particularly important. In recent years, alternative models have emerged under terms like contract grading, labor based grading, and ungrading.

These take on infinite forms, but one basic premise for English and writing classes is to disentangle the subjective but most important creative and intellectual work of the class from other elements of labor and behavior, such as meeting deadlines, formatting, surface level grammar, congenial class participation, and making good faith efforts at the work of the class. A grading contract details a set of things that, if satisfactorily done, ensure a baseline grade in the class. Say, B-. The rest of the grade comes from the finer and more difficult process-based work, which is also the most rewarding and where the learning happens. Contract grading or scaffolding the class with lots of sequential, low-stakes writing can help shift the emphasis onto intrinsic things—rewards that come from doing the work itself.

José Araguz has been working with contract grading models in his classes for a number of years, and sees it both as a way to ensure student accountability and to build student autonomy in their writing and thinking.

"Students are smart," he said. "They get into our classes with the skills that have helped them survive. That's 'how do I quickly determine what is wanted of me?' When I teach writing, at the end of the semester, I want you closer to your own voice. We’re trying to teach how to write, not what the product is supposed to look like. Instead of taking two sonnets that both follow the form and say one is a C and another is a B, we can focus on process, developing their own skill and autonomy, and taking greater risks."

When many of the things that can affect the grade of a traditional writing assignment (deadlines, formatting, following the prompt, etc.) are graded separately according to the class labor standards, the focus can fall far more on how a students sets and pursues their own goals through writing.

With high stakes grading on original student work, a student is encouraged to take a safe approach, repeating conventional wisdom about well-worn topics, mostly passively repeating something they’ve been trained is an acceptable thing to say and an acceptable way to say it. It's following a prescribed social and compositional formula, and a motivation of pleasing authority rather than using language and thought independently to meet a particular situation. There’s also fairness. "I'm constantly asking how I make this more equitable," Araguz said. "Traditional models favor native English speakers, people who have had previous experience with these kinds of tasks, people who have been thoroughly cultured into American academia vs. first generation and international students who are grappling with so many things for the first time. The goal of writing assignments is to learn how to write and to learn about yourself as a writer. You can do that without writing a perfect essay."

This all comes back to the old tension of proficiency vs. growth. As teachers of writing and reading, we don’t use essay assignments to measure existing proficiency so much as to promote student growth. It’s not using assignments to gatekeep, but to train, to enable students to get stronger by doing the writing and thinking for themselves and claiming their own authority to do so. Just as with physical exercise, it’s the work that makes writers stronger. These grading models incentivize that.

Araguz gives extensive feedback, but ranks each draft as "ready to be shared," "work still to be done," and "redo recommended." Offering students opportunities to revise further after a graded assignment further demonstrates writing as an ongoing, iterative process. Done carefully, it can also help mitigate the institutional and cultural obstacles related to race, disability, language, class, and more. "Just grade harder" has always been punitive. Instead, we can ask what our grading strategies do for our specific students’ growth.

"We’re training them," Araguz said. "They are experts in training."

We should keep that in mind.

Resources

Crowdsourcing Ungrading, David Buck
*Grading Contract Journey Part I: First-Year Writing* and *Grading Contract Journey Part II: Fiction Writing,* John Warner
*Why we stopped grading our students on their writing,* Marisa Milanese and Gwen Kordonowy
*Why Some College Writing Professors Are Ditching Traditional Grading,* Elizabeth Stone
Boston University Faculty Seminar 2021: "Grading Equitably: Rethinking Grading, from Contract Grading to Ungrading, Specs Grading, and More"

The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading, Ellen C. Carlo

Ungrading edited by Susan D. Blum, reviewed here and here. See an interview with Blum here.

*Laziness Does Not Exist,* Devon Price

*Should Writers Use Their Own English?*, Ver- shawn Ashanti Young
Publications, awards, talks, teaching news, conferences, travel

JOSE ANGEL ARAGUZ

Grants: received a Mass Cultural Council Cultural Sector Recovery for Individuals grant and a grant from the Malden Cultural Council. He also recently served as a grant reviewer for the Poetry Foundation and a panelist for *The Writing Life: Writing As A Life*, a panel at The Writing Life literary conference at the University College Dublin.


ELIF ARMBRUSTER
Invited lecture at the Université de Paris IV—Sorbonne in November on "Edith Wharton in Paris and World War I."

Paper presentation: "From the Street to the Soul: Finding the Beautiful in Edith Wharton’s Writing (1910-1920)," at the American Literature Association on May 27 in Boston.

WYATT BONIKOWSKI
Flash fiction: “Broken Record” in the online literary magazine HAD on Jan. 25.

BARRETT BOWLIN
Workshop: "And Then What Happened?" Flash Fiction and Working through Writer’s Block* at SUNY Cortland on April 12.

Reading: Distinguished Voices in Literature Series at SUNY Cortland on April 12.

LESLIE ECKEL
Paper presentation: "An Antiracist Approach to Teaching Self-Reliance," at an international conference on Infrastructures of Racism and the Contours of Black Vitality and Resistance at the University of Torino, Italy. It focused on a section of her American Literature I course that explores the theory and practice of self-reliance.

GAiL HAANON

HANNAH HUDSON

Fellowship: awarded a two-year M.C. Lang Fellowship in Book History, Bibliography, and Humanities Teaching with Historical Sources by the Rare Book School at the University of Virginia.

Talks: one for Stanford University’s Continuing Studies Program on the origins of the Gothic novel; two at the American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies’ annual meeting, on eighteenth-century miscellaneous magazines.

PETER JEFFREYS
Talk: the 33rd Leontis Memorial Lecture in Modern Greek Studies at The Ohio State University on April 6th. His topic was "The Other Cavaliers: The Creative Aspirations of John, Aristides, and Paul."

Article: “*If I met Cavafy today...*” in the Athens daily newspaper, *TA NEA*, in commemoration of the 160th anniversary of the Greek poet’s birth.

QUENTIN MILLER


Panel: "The Future of Study Abroad Programs in a Post-Covid World" at the Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA) Convention in Niagara Falls in March.

Panel: "Revisiting The Centaur: Updike’s Ulysses at Sixty" at the American Literature Association (ALA) Convention in Boston in May.


AMY MONTICELLO
Award: won the Suffolk SGA CAS Outstanding Faculty of the Year award.


Reading: Featured reader at “Raw Emotion” art gallery opening at Jameson and Thompson in Boston on May 4, 2023, along with Jessica Fein, Nicole Graev Lipson, and Karen Winn.


BRYAN TRABOLD
Article: “The Involvement of the State Had to be a Secret: The Impact of Vrye Weekblad and Weekly Mail Exposés on the Apartheid Government and its Conservative Apologists in the United States” in *South African Historical Journal*. This article examines two of the most significant exposés published during apartheid: the revelations that the South African government was using death squads and also funding black counter-revolutionary forces to murder members of the anti-apartheid struggle. These stories, published at considerable risk for the editors and journalists of these newspapers, had a profound political impact in both South Africa and the United States.

SALAMANDER literary journal recently published its 55th issue, including work by Keetje Kuipers, Ana Maria Caballero, Chin Shier Ting, Despy Botiris, Xochiquetzal Candelaria, Iris Jamahl Dunkle, Ugochukwu Damian Okpara, Hassaan Mirza, Brad Wetherell, and an art portfolio by Ruth Marie. Editor José Angel Araguz hosted a virtual reading celebrating the issue on March 23rd featuring readings by poets Maria S. Picone and Quinn Rennerfeldt as well as fiction by Evelyn Maguire.
Too Much from Too Many of the Wrong People
Hannah Hudson's *Romantic Fiction and Literary Excess in the Minerva Press Era*

Call it the Romantic Period if you want, but most people who aren’t scholars of the time could summon at best the names of a dozen authors to define it as a canon. There were far more. A great many of them wrote for women and working class readers. Those writings, of course, were at first ignored, then laughed at, then derided, then spoken of by critics and other gatekeepers with apocalyptic horror as the end of all things and all people, largely because there were so terrifyingly many of them. Literary excess, critics wrote. Far too much to read, and too much of it trash.

Hannah Hudson recently published a book of her research on Minerva Press, which operated under that name from 1790-1820. Even though there were many presses at the time, Minerva produced more than 25 percent of all the novels in England during those years, more than 5 times the numbers of titles of any other publisher in the period.

What made Hudson’s project possible was a massive bibliography done in 2001 tracking all novels published in England from 1770-1829. That enabled her to quantify how many books had been printed by different presses. Turns out, a lot of books that dominated that market have been left out of the Romantic literary canon.

"Minerva’s publisher, William Lane, did a similar thing to Amazon," Hudson said. He brought in-house printers where other presses had outsourced that work. He also had a giant circulating library on site so he could lend books out and sell to people directly. He also had periodicals where he could advertise and review his own press’s novels and advertise for authors to submit their novels. People who wanted to start their own circulating library could order their own stock of books from him. He found the synergy of vertical integration: publishing, printing, reviewing, lending, selling, and advertising. He also extended into rural areas. He jumped on trends like the Gothic novel, which was becoming very popular, and sentimental fiction. He was good at finding authors to churn out lots of new titles. Afterwards, other publishers started doing the same thing.

"It was very famous but also quickly very infamous," Hudson said, "because the novel as a whole was pretty controversial at the time. Higher classes questioned if the novel was immoral and pernicious. They feared it was bad that women and working class people were reading and writing these things. Minerva quickly grew bigger than everybody else. By the end of its lifespan and for 50 years after, Victorians referred to Minerva as the bottom of the barrel, trash."

It’s no coincidence that writing by and for women and working class people gets excluded as trash in those circles where the limits of “good” literature are more strictly defined.

"When everybody’s reading something, but everybody’s also criticizing it, we should be interested in what motivates that gatekeeping," Hudson said. "These novels stirred up lot of anxiety because fiction stirs up emotion, and higher classes feared that novels would stir up revolution in England. They were concerned about the dangers of those things in what they considered to be the wrong hands. Fiction is powerful but also scary. It might spark a flame you can’t put out."

While Hudson discusses more than 100 of these novels and hundreds of magazines, many of these claims from critics and status quo defenders weren’t about the individual books, but about how people were using them ideologically. This didn’t necessarily have anything to do with what readers were actually doing or thinking. Much of the criticism was of the slippery slope variety, positing “what if” questions about what certain literature would cause the rabble to do. Trafficking heavily in apocalyptic imagery—plagues, locusts, floods, fires, and volcanoes—it’s clearly about a loss of or at least shift in cultural control, and whoever is losing not wanting to lose it. It was fear of upsetting the power structure.

"I think it should make us very suspicious of any sort of hierarchies or groupings that seem ‘natural’ in literary terms," she said. "We should consider how and why these things got constructed, by whom, and whom are they serving."

With far more being published than any one person could read, this period of literary production might mark the beginnings of our own.

"When I worked for Random House, they had Knopf and other imprints that published romance novels," Hudson said. "Women’s fiction still often is not considered serious. It wouldn’t be reviewed in prestigious journals or be published at all."

She describes a tipping point in novel publication. In the early 18th century, it was possible for a reviewer to read every novel published in a year, but with Minerva, that was no longer possible. As soon as there became too much, they had to draw categories. A critic wouldn’t have to feel bad, then, about not giving the trash category the time of day.

Also, such volume and such diversification meant people could start building collective organizations focused on readerships in narrow subgenres that they could never do before. These are the precursors of contemporary popular "genre" literature like romance, sci-fi, fantasy, mystery, and horror.

Nobody, except Hudson in this book, calls it the Minerva Press Era. It’s the Romantic period, closely associated with a handful of specific poets and works that have become decontextualized, as if they didn’t come from a time and place and circumstance. She argues that, rather than considering this excess as trash around the edges, we put it at the center and see what the literary ecosystem of the period actually looked like—to look from the perspective of readers, not just critics. Even if you ignore all of these books, she argues, everything you read from the Romantic period is somehow responding to them.

"I love literature in the abstract," she said, "but I think it’s incredible how especially historical works are so abstracted when we get them, maybe because there’s an antipathy to business processes in literary study, which I get, but I don’t think we’re doing ourselves any favors by pretending the structures that exist sprang from nowhere. They came from business, academic, and cultural institutions that evolved over time. If you look from the critics’ perspective, it’s all about marginalization, but it was also an opportunity for novelists to share community, to do new things, to take new risks, and to reach new audiences. We shouldn’t ignore the sorts of innovations this growth allows."
Top left: students in Leslie Eckel’s ENG 218 American Literature II class visit the Art of the Americas galleries at the Museum of Fine Arts on March 2. Top right: students in Eckel’s ENG 500 Senior Capstone Seminar present her with appreciative gifts at the end of this first iteration of the capstone course. Students in this class also presented their final team projects. These 11 seniors worked in teams from each of the three English concentrations to design and produce projects that reflect on their experiences and growth as English majors. Projects took the form of a podcast (Literature), a chapbook (Creative Writing), and a professional pamphlet (Public and Professional Writing). Above: In keeping with the theme for the senior capstone, "American writers abroad," ENG 500 students visit the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America in Cambridge to meet with reference librarian Tamar Brown and explore the library’s archives from Julia Child’s years in France.

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Email Syntax editor Jason Tucker at jwttucker@suffolk.edu.

Newbury in college poetry competition

Suffolk undergraduate English Major Mason Newbury represented Suffolk as a finalist at the 100th anniversary of the Glascock Intercollegiate Poetry Competition at Mount Holyoke College on March 31. The guest judges for this year’s competition were renowned poets Hoa Nguyen, Evie Shockley and Eileen Myles. The event was live streamed, and the recording is viewable [here](#). Newbury’s part begins just after the 50:00 mark.