

Message From The Chair

As we close out the school year and begin to think about the new crop of students entering in Fall 2022, I reflect on the question that poets and philosophers, authors and academics have asked forever, "Why (Do I) Write?" What is the efficacy? Answers vary. Some inspire. Gloria Anzaldúa writes, "because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me." Others annoy. Cormac McCarthy quips, "I don't know why I started writing. I don't know why anybody does it. Maybe they're bored, or failures at something else." But write we do ... and read and discuss and theorize.

"Why *teach* writing?" is another question that my colleagues and I ask and answer many times over the course of our careers. For us—to quote sideways the famous line from Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats"—writing "makes something happen." What happens when students can write well? They find their voices, claim their commitments, create new words; and they both *take* their place at the table and gain the confidence to "shake it up," in the words of Michelle Obama. Or maybe they write when they're just bored. In any case we are excited by what we do, and as you'll see in the pages to follow, we are also good at it! If you're an alum or friend of English, tell us what your own writing and reading are making happen. Send an email message to: engnews@central.uh.edu.

Ann Christensen

Dr. Tolliver Wins Prestigious NHC Fellowship

Dr. Cedric Tolliver has been named a National Humanities Center (NHC) Fellow for the 2022-23 academic year. He is among 33 scholars chosen from 592 applicants for this prestigious honor which comes with a \$50,000 stipend and time to dedicate to research using the center's renowned library collections. The National Humanities Center is a unique institution providing scholars with the resources necessary to generate new knowledge and to further understanding of all forms of cultural expression, social interaction, and human thought within the academic community and for wider audiences.



Dr. Tolliver will spend the next academic year working on his manuscript, "Spook(ed): African American Literature, National Security, and the Fictions of Statecraft."

He described the project as inspired by Sam Greenlee's "The Spook Who Sat by the Door (1969)", a novel about the nation's first Black CIA officer who quits the agency and uses his expertise to teach a Chicago street gang how to gather intelligence and use the subversive techniques of urban guerilla warfare during a riot. Tolliver noted that his book "speaks directly to a fundamental tension at the heart of the project of racial integration in the United States over the last 70 years: incorporating individual African Americans into the government when, as a group, African Americans have been viewed almost exclusively as an internal subversive threat for most of U.S. history."

Dr. Tolliver has twice been a Fulbright Scholar and in 2019, his monograph, "Of Vagabonds and Fellow Travelers: African Diaspora Literary Culture and the Cultural Cold War" (University of Michigan Press), received the American Library Association's Choice Outstanding Academic Title for 2020. As an NHC fellow, he joins a distinguished list of scholars and thinkers who have written books that have gone on to win or been finalists for the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the MacArthur Fellowship, the Pulitzer Prize and many others. As a fellow, he looks forward to exchanging ideas with colleagues who have made the leap from writing exclusively for academics to a wider audience of serious nonfiction readers.

In Memoriam: Richard Howard, Poet and UH Professor (1929-2022)

Richard Howard, renowned poet, translator, professor, editor, and mentor passed away on March 31st in New York City, survived by his husband David Alexander. He published eighteen collections of poetry, of which "Untitled Subjects" won the Pulitzer Prize. He also wrote many collections of critical essays and was the long time Poetry Editor of the Paris Review. While at UH, he was named University Professor of English. His other awards included a MacArthur Fellowship, the Academy of Arts and Letters Literary Award, and serving as Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

As a translator, Howard won the National Book Award for his translation of Charles Baudelaire's "Les Fleurs du Mal" and has been credited with introducing the American readership to the French Nouveau Roman. Over his career he authored more than 150 translations from the French including works by Stendhal, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir.

During his tenure at UH he lived in the Montrose area and was known for his lively seminars and dramatic and engaging reading style. Dr. Martha Serpas remembers him as "such a lion around RG, and such a generous, really generous teacher." For Dr. Ann Christensen her fondest memory of him was his withering aristocratic rendition of Browning's "My Last Duchess," which is captured on poets.org in all its chilling performativity. He was known for reviving the form of the dramatic monologue in American poetry, and that evening he interpolated Browning's poem among his own poems. The crowd gathered at the MFAH theatre was rapt.

Howard's friend and UH colleague, the poet Ed Hirsch, told the Washington Post that Howard's innovative dramatic monologues gave voice to self-exploration, noting that Howard had grown up gay in the 1940s in Ohio. "It's possible to be dazzled by the literary encyclopedia coming to life," he added, "and to miss the fact that these poems are driven by personal experience, by a need to disguise yourself and reveal yourself."

Richard Howard's active career as a writer, translator and mentor continued well into his eighties. He is mourned by the UH community who loved him well.



Professor Richard Howard looks at camera at Staff meeting (middle left). (Photo/ University of Houston Archives)

Spotlight: Teaching Excellence Award Winners

This spring, one faculty member and three graduate students from the Department of English won the highly competitive Provost Teaching Excellence Awards. These awards go to fewer than twenty faculty members and fewer than five graduate teaching assistants across the entire UH campus; so, English was well represented indeed! Congratulations to the winners, Dr. Amanda Ellis, and graduate students Colby Ornell, Obi Umeozor, and Brian McWilliams, who exemplify the truly excellent teaching for which our department is known.

Dr. Amanda Ellis is an Assistant Professor who specializes in Mexican American literary studies, ethnic studies, and cultural studies; she teaches courses in the Critical Studies of the Americas stream. She told "Forward" that her relationships with her students often endure beyond their brief time enrolled in her courses. She believes this continuity comes from her efforts to create a classroom where students are safe to



offer and test their burgeoning and tentative ideas, relate their successes, air their grievances, and even share their sorrows. "The moments I cherish most, are those that extend beyond the normal space of our time in the classroom. Each time my students circle back to me and invite me to their dissertation defenses, weddings, poetry readings, doctoral hooding ceremonies, or simply email me to share their latest accomplishments or reflections - I am reminded of why I teach through restorative pedagogies." This pedagogical practice cultivates student learning through empathic relationality. Dr. Ellis explained that the Provost's Teaching Excellence Award reaffirms her commitment to pedagogies that empower students to hone their own unique gifts through close reading, critical dialogue, and collaborative exchange. "Teaching, as a vocation, remains the highest honor, but it is incalculably gratifying to know that the way I intentionally steward the university classroom has been recognized by students, colleagues, and leaders at the University of Houston."

Graduate Student Teaching Excellence Award Winners

Colby Ornell expressed to "Forward" that the highlight of teaching at UH is, for her, the students who have a passion for learning and are open to what is new, what may be less familiar, and what is challenging. "I've never worked with so many earnest, hard-working young people before, and certainly not so many who come from different backgrounds, identities, and life experiences. Despite those differences and despite the challenges of online and face-to-face classes, it seems as though each semester we build a small community." She describes the opportunity to build relationships with her students as a privilege. She is honored to be recognized with the Provost's Teaching Excellence Award, seeing it as a reflection of the support she has received as a Ph.D. student and an instructor. "The award process can feel daunting, but every administrator and faculty member I asked for support or contribution along the way was incredibly generous with their time and energy. That experience encapsulates the whole of my time with the English department—every time I've needed support, I've been given it tenfold, but I've also been given the autonomy and independence to define my teaching style and practices."

Colby Ornell is from a small town in Massachusetts and holds degrees from Wheaton College and Butler University. Currently, she is a Ph.D. Candidate in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Houston and serves as a fiction editor for Gulf Coast. Her work has appeared in several literary magazines.



Obi Umeozor recognizes a moment in his Spring 2021 Short Story Workshop as one of his fondest memories of teaching. The class was filled with students who were relatively new to short story writing and he made it a goal to foster a relaxed environment in which we could explore story structure and all that it entailed. One day, an argument came up about the importance of conflict in storytelling, and it sparked a spirited debate about how vital "trouble" was to character-growth and the cynicism embedded in such an ideology. He told "Forward", "I sat back, beaming with pride as these writers rolled out their impassioned arguments. I recognized the glint in their eyes. There is immense power in passing on to sharp and willing minds the obsession with and appreciation of your chosen craft and watch it take a hold of them. It is a power I intend to cling to." He is honored to be recognized with a TEA award as teaching is as dear to his heart as writing. He sees the award as validation that he is imparting to his students the same love of storytelling he possesses. "It feels as though somewhere out there, my teaching has left its mark on someone, and an institution as vast as the University of Houston has taken notice of it. I have no illusions about how rare that is, and how blessed I am."

Obi Umeozor received his MFA in Creative Writing from Florida State University. His work has appeared in the New Orleans Review, adda, Shift and others, and he has taught fiction workshops at UH, Boldface and Strikethrough, Grackle & Grackle, among others. He has been shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He was a Fiction Editor at Gulf Coast Journal. Obi is currently an InPrint Mary Gibbs & Jesse H. Jones Fellow, and a PhD (Fiction) candidate at UH's Creative Writing Program.



Brian McWilliams is a Ph.D. candidate in Rhetoric, Composition and Pedagogy at UH, a Houston resident, military veteran, and has worked for many years as a firefighter in Houston before making what he considers "the lumbering transition" into graduate studies and teaching. He earned his M.A. from Sam Houston State University. His background includes a diverse mix of composition and literature, philosophy, engineering, computer science, fire science, and earning a collegiate skydiving record in the process.



Department of English Medievalists Host "The Green Knight" Screening and Panel

In March, Dr. Lorraine Stock and Dr. Daniel Davies organized a free screening of David Lowery's 2021 film "The Green Knight" along with a panel discussion with local medievalists to reflect on the major adaptation of the medieval poem "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Both Dr. Stock and Dr. Davies were teaching the poem this semester, so the film screening and panel presented a perfect opportunity to harness campus interest in the Middle Ages.



The panel featured two outside presenters, Dr. Esther Liberman Cuenca, a historian at UH Victoria, and Dr. Boxer, a specialist in medieval visual culture at Rice University. As Davies explained to "Forward", "Medieval studies is inherently interdisciplinary, partly because medieval culture itself requires an interdisciplinary lens: for example, to what discipline does a medieval manuscript belong? Scholars of English are interested in its literary texts, while art historians are interested in its status as a material object, and historians are interested in the information it contains." The event was an excellent example of academic community building in the face of pandemic constraints.

Both Dr. Stock and Dr. Liberman Cuenca (UH Victoria) are experts in "movie medievalism" (the study of film adaptations of medieval texts) as well as their more traditional specializations of Middle English literature (Stock) and medieval law (Liberman Cuenca). Adaptations show the vitality of medieval storytelling, as well as the continued interest in all things medieval in contemporary society. As Liberman Cuenca described it, Arthurian romances such as "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" are the original examples of "expanded universes" because while they were written at different times, languages, and places, they would draw on a core series of characters and ideas that audiences would be familiar with. For her, the current trend for sprawling franchises like "Star Wars" or the "Marvel Comics Expanded Universe" is a return to medieval culture. Stock took the audience through a tour-de-force account of how Lowery's film changed the role and representation of women in the Gawain story. Meanwhile, Boxer, an art historian who excels at revealing the unspoken visual consonances between images, described some of the influences behind the buildings and exteriors in the film, such as the Romanesque church that echoes Arthur's great hall. Lowery's nuanced engagement with the Middle Ages anchored the audience to think about the creation of timelessness in the film—how the film feels unhinged within time yet at the same time floating free from it. For Davies, while "The Green Knight" didn't follow the fourteenth-century source text word for word, the sense of timelessness the film achieves visually, and narratively in its evocation of the unexplained, unexpected, and downright strange, is what made it feel authentically medieval.

The event was sponsored by the Martha Gano Houston Endowment and the Media and Moving Image Initiative programming funds. The discussion left the audience fascinated by what a beguiling, challenging, and charismatic film David Lowery's "The Green Knight" proved to be. The panel also showcased the range of medievalist scholars in the Houston area and presenters hope it is the first of many collaborative interdisciplinary events to be hosted at UH.

Have News?

The Department of English would love to hear from you! Write us at engnews@central.uh.edu.

Dr. Sursavage Wins Honors College Mentorship Award

Dr. Mark Sursavage, Director of the UH Writing Center, has recently been named the recipient of an Honor's College mentorship award for his work with Fulbright Award applicants.

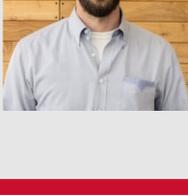
In his capacity as director, Sursavage ensures the UH Writing Center supports the Honors College's Office of Undergraduate Research and Major Awards (OURMA) by providing workshops and individual feedback for students who are writing their Fulbright application materials, such as personal statements and statements of grant purpose. Trained by the Writing Center staff, consultants are undergraduate students who act as intermediaries between students and faculty as they assist their peers with their writing. Academic characterizes the learning environment in the center as a place where peer, professional, and academic mentorship thrive. According to him, undergraduate consultants "already inhabit a liminal space that introduces them to academic discourse and how other students navigate it. As a result, our staff's mentoring often takes the form of small bits of guidance that allow our undergraduates to connect their own academic experiences with a broader body of knowledge." So far, six consultants have been named Mellon Scholars, and Sursavage knows that, whatever their discipline, "the mentoring they receive in the UH Writing Center helps them understand how they can actively engage with an academic discourse and gives them the confidence in their ability to make a meaningful contribution."

Sursavage also worked one-on-one this year as a recommender for the Fulbright application of a very talented English major who was a semi-finalist for one of the most competitive countries.

While the Fulbright workshops offered by the center began just last year, they will expand this summer and are an extension of the work that the UH Writing Center has been doing with OURMA for years, such as facilitating writing studios for students completing Honors theses, offering workshops for Gilman Scholarship applicants, and partnering with English department faculty to support Mellon Scholars.

Since 2018, UH has twice been a top producing institution of Fulbright students. Sursavage thinks this record makes a strong argument for the talent and potential of UH undergraduates when they're provided with the guidance and support structures to succeed. He tells "Forward", "There are challenges presented by the number of UH students who are the first in their family to go to college and those who are immersed in their own families and lives rather than a stereotypical college experience of leaving home to focus on education.

But there are also immense resources in the experiences that undergraduates bring to their education at UH and the ability to connect seemingly disparate parts of their lives in innovative ways." Resources such as the Honors College's OURMA and the UH Writing Center can help students understand the connections between the different aspects of their education and their lives. For Sursavage, this recent record of success is an indication that staff and faculty at UH are doing a better job than ever of fulfilling their responsibility to help undergraduates realize their potential.



This has message has been sent on behalf of Dr. Ann Christensen, Chair of the Department of English. If you have any questions don't hesitate to call (713) 743-3004, or write engnews@central.uh.edu

