

# Alumni Notes

Issue V

News from the English Department of Tufts University

## IN THIS ISSUE

Alum Makes Gift to English Dept. 1

Faculty Questionnaire 2

Graduate Student Job Placement 3

A Former English Major Reflects 4

Faculty Book Recommendations 5

Faculty News and Publications 6

## Notes from the Chair

If there's one thing that literary study should teach us it's never to put too much faith in endings. However passionately we anticipate—however pleased we may be to arrive at—the closure that comes with a sonnet's last rhyme or the knitting up of a novel's strands, we know that reaching the conclusion doesn't mean coming to an end. As *Finnegan's Wake* shows vividly, the text lives all its moments at once so that, as T.S. Eliot wrote, "in my end is my beginning." Students of literature experience this in a host of different ways: the characters of a novel live on regardless of the fate their authors assign them; the words of a poem reverberate outside the texts in which they're contained. And to those of us for whom literature evinces the complexity of thinking the world, the end of the work merely leads us back to rethink what came before it, prompting us to weigh its proposal of a satisfying resolution against the contradictions of rhetoric and representation that might challenge such co-



Lee Edelman,  
Chair of the English Department

hesion.

That's why serious students of literature don't so much read as re-read. The repetition marked by this prefix defines a movement of return, but the paradox of re-reading is that the text you return to isn't what you read before. In Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys*, James Cole declares while re-watching *Vertigo*, "The movie never changes. It doesn't change. But every time you see it it's different, because you're

different." One difference of the text the second time around is the fact that, by virtue of having encountered it before, we see its various moments in relation to those that we know will follow. Each reading makes changes in what we know and, in consequence, in the shape of the whole. But it isn't only we who change; the "sameness" of the text isn't certain. Even the words on the page, after all, may result from some reader's decision. Which is the "true" version of Shake-

*Continued on page 3*

## Alum Makes Gift to The English Dept.

All too often the value of the Humanities can be measured in inverse relation to its standing in the culture at large. That contradiction inheres in the disparity between the lip-service paid to the importance of the Humanities (think of politicians enraged at the thought—itsself no more than a fantasy—that students are reading Toni Morrison's novels *instead* of Shakespeare's plays) even as the financial investments that reveal the real locus of cultural value are telling a different story (think of the reductions in funding to the National Endowment for the Arts or the National Endowment for the Humanities, or even NPR). We saw this contradiction writ large at the height of the so-called Culture Wars when the Humanities (and the intellectual engagement with deconstruction, multiculturalism, feminism, race studies, and queer theory)

*Continued on page 5*

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Spring 2011

# Faculty Questionnaire

- ◆ What was the best book you read last year?
- ◆ What film would you recommend to our newsletter's readers?
- ◆ What author would you most like to have been able to meet?

## Jonathan Wilson

- ◆ Jean-Phillipe Toussant's *Television*
- ◆ Abdellatif Kechiche's *The Secret of the Grain*



## Lee Edelman

- ◆ Tolstoy's *War and Peace*
- ◆ Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*
- ◆ Marcel Proust



## David Valdes Greenwood

- ◆ A tie between Per Petterson's *Out Stealing Horses* and *The Likeness* by Tana French
- ◆ *Un Prophete*
- ◆ James Baldwin and Caryl Churchill



## Linda Bamber

- ◆ Robert Fagles' translation of *The Iliad*
- ◆ *Long Night's Journey Into Day*



## Joseph D Litvak

- ◆ Alain Badiou's *Ethics*
- ◆ *Un Prophete* by Jacques Audiard



## Joseph Hurka

- ◆ *Dubliners* by James Joyce
- ◆ *In the Bedroom* by Todd Field
- ◆ A young James Joyce, to get a sense of where his stories came from, and how he held himself together through so many years of rejection and difficulty



## Daniel Bosch

- ◆ *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy
- ◆ *Notre Musique* by Jean-Luc Godard
- ◆ Miquel De Cervantes



# Tufts Graduate Student Job Placement

The job market for English graduate students has been fiercely competitive for many years, but at Tufts we are pleased that our graduate students are finding success. Last year under the guidance of the Job Placement Director, Christina Sharpe, the following Tufts graduate students were hired for academic positions.

## *The following Ph.D. graduates have secured academic positions:*

- Kristina Aikens** (G '08), Assistant Director of the Academic Resource Center at Tufts University, Medford, MA  
**Kerri Bowen** (G '10), visiting Assistant Professor at Stonehill College, Easton, MA  
**Pamela Buck** (G '09), tenure-track, Assistant Professor at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT  
**Abigail Manzella** (G '10), Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Centre College, Danville, KY  
**Carl Grey Martin** (G '05), tenure-track, Assistant Professor of English at Norwich University, Northfield, VT  
**Marta S. Rivera Monclova** (G '10), Adjunct Faculty at Bentley University, Waltham, MA and Suffolk University, Boston, MA  
**Margaret Toth** (G '09), tenure track, Assistant Professor of English, late 19th and early 20th century American Literature, at Manhattan College, Riverdale, NY

### **Notes from the Chair** *continued from page 1*

spere, of *Ulysses*, of Plath's *Ariel*, or Ellison's *Juneteenth*? A text's network of associations, moreover, is both infinite and incomplete, always subject to change as new events give rise to new ways of encountering and responding to what the text now also contains. Charlotte Bronte could not have been fluent in the discourse of post-colonialism, but *Jane Eyre*, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Jean Rhys quite differently observe, may speak to it nonetheless. The literary text is never finished and reading, therefore, never stops.

So now, as another school year winds down and the class of 2011 approaches its graduation, I'm reminded just how arbitrary endings are. One of my senior advisees said: "There are still so many classes I haven't taken; I'm not ready to leave Tufts!" The good thing, of course, is that you don't. You alums who have been reading this newsletter for a while know that Tufts remains a part of your life, informing who you are, even now; and for those of you leaving the Hill this year, the Hill is bound to follow you. If you've paid attention over the last four years, if you've taken to heart what you've learned in class, then you're ready to make those untaken courses the stuff of the rest of your life. The ideas you've explored, the worlds you've encountered, the ways of thinking you've internalized: all these are now inseparable from the adults that you've grown into here. And they prepare you to move on to new reading lists, new films to see, new cultural experiences to interpret with confidence that you can continue to build on the skills you've developed in your courses at Tufts. Most of you won't have the time or good fortune to spend your days as deeply immersed in intellectual discovery and conversation as you could while here on the Hill. But those ideas and those discoveries have half-lives that are unexpectedly long. And even their decay is just a transformation into who and what we are. So to welcome our newest graduates not to the end, but, instead, to another phase of their ongoing relation to Tufts, we are mailing this newsletter later than usual: in May instead of last fall. Our goal is to get you new graduates to read it as you enter the ranks of our alums and to encourage you to become a part of it once you leave the Hill. As you'll see, the pages of this newsletter offer information and updates from the English Department, but they also include opportunities to catch up with friends,

to inform us about what you're reading or viewing, or to tell us how your studies at Tufts are shaping your ideas today. In this issue, for instance, we are delighted to feature a profile of Jon Berger. We hope others among you will share reminiscences, sketches of your current occupations and activities, or reflections on literary or cultural questions for inclusion in these pages. We put no limits on what you can submit. Consider this a chance to return to Tufts and continue a conversation with faculty and peers on any topic that seems appropriate. Maybe, for instance, you've reread a book that you first encountered in a class on the Hill and are struck by how much more it resonates now than it did when you read it the first time. Or perhaps you've encountered a text for the first time that you'd love to talk about the way you could have if you still were in classes at Tufts. We want to create a forum to encourage conversations that (figuratively) bring everyone to Medford and that take Medford around the globe. (Though the thought of a universe of Medfords is not exactly what we have in mind!)

In the future we'll be looking at ways technology might make this newsletter more interactive. Any suggestions for how to do so are always welcome; please share your ideas.

And finally, on the subject of endings, I should note that this is my final contribution to the section titled "Notes from the Chair." After two terms (six years!) as Chair of the Department, I am happily returning to teaching full-time and to moving forward with my writing and research. So this change is hardly an end for me, either. I will continue to be represented in the pages of Alumni Notes and I look forward to the opportunity to continue conversations with the many amazing students who have used this forum as a way to stay in touch. To those of you in the class of 2011: the members of the English Department wish you all our warmest congratulations. This isn't the end of your connection to the Department; it's only, as Eliot knew, a beginning—or as we might say, a Commencement.

If you are a senior in the class of 2011, please keep us updated with your current email address so we can send you future issues of Alumni Notes. Send your email address, along with any information about yourself, or reflections on Tufts, updates about your life, or articles you'd like to submit for consideration to the following address: [English@tufts.edu](mailto:English@tufts.edu). ☞

## Jon Berger, CEO of PlanAhead, LLC, Reflects on His Experience as an English Major

There are defining moments in a person's life that, even as the years pass with a quickening pace, one can reflect upon with crystal clarity as if they just occurred. Such is the case when, arriving at Tufts in 1982 as a mid-year transfer sophomore, I declared an English major and perused the courses offered for the spring semester, selecting "Twentieth Century American Poetry" as my first foray into the subject. A young associate professor, who looked to be the same age as many of his students, taught the class. He brought a passionate exuberance to his teachings, the likes of which I had never experienced. The professor was Lee Edelman, the current Fletcher Chair of the English Department.

I remember being fully engaged in his class, which fostered my ability to critically think and, more importantly, encouraged me to have the confidence to share my thoughts with others. I was fortunate to take two other courses taught by Professor Edelman and, to this day, fondly recall the passion he brought to each and every class. For this, I give full credit to and, thus, am indebted to Lee Edelman.

It was because of Professor Edelman that English moved from simply my major to a true passion. I began to collect letters and signed works from the poets and authors I studied, a hobby that continues. On the walls of my office are signed pieces of corre-

spondence from those writers to whom Lee Edelman first introduced me, such as Hart Crane, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams and W.B. Yeats, to name but a few.

My wife, Susan, and our daughters, Sami and Carly, know just how much I cherish my experience at Tufts. (Why else would I still carry my Tufts I.D. in my wallet?) They even find it "kind of cool" I actually have letters from some of the very authors *they* are studying in school! (As a father of teenage daughters, "kind of cool" is sometimes the best one can hope for!)

Upon graduating from Tufts, I returned to Los Angeles, where I currently live—and where I was born and raised. It was here, twenty years ago, that I founded PlanAhead, a supplier of office products to most major mass-market retailers (think Wal-Mart, Target, etc.) and, several years later, Overland Travelware, a provider of luggage, business cases and backpacks to the same class of trade.

My hope is that every student will find their "Lee Edelman", a mentor who inspires the passion within and the confidence to flourish. Both he and Tufts did this for me. I remember it like yesterday--and will never forget. ∞

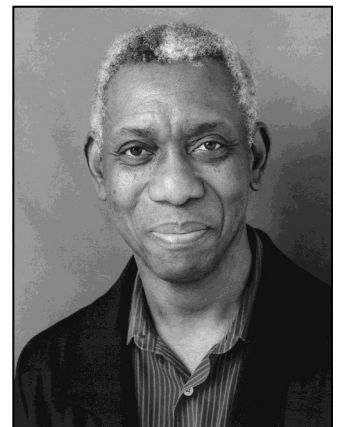
### Poetry Reading: Yusef Komunyakaa

On Oct. 18th the English Department hosted a reading by celebrated American poet Yusef Komunyakaa, author of the acclaimed collection of poems *Neon Vernacular*. He was greeted by a full, eager audience in Sophia Gordon Hall.

Komunyakaa has published several books poetry and garnered numerous prestigious awards, including, in 1994, the Pulitzer Prize as well as the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Prize for *Neon Vernacular*. He has been awarded the Ruth Lily Poetry Prize, and in 2007, the Louisiana Writers Award for his enduring contribution to the poetry world. Earlier in his career he received the Bronze Star for his army service during the Vietnam War, serving as a correspondent and managing editor of the *Southern Cross*.

Attending a poetry class before the reading, Komunyakaa spoke his poems from memory and discussed his writing process, which involves daily and copious note-taking followed by hand written revision, and layering over time

Born and raised in Louisiana and now based in New York City, Komunyakaa teaches in the Creative Writing Program at NYU where he is the Global Distinguished Professor of English.

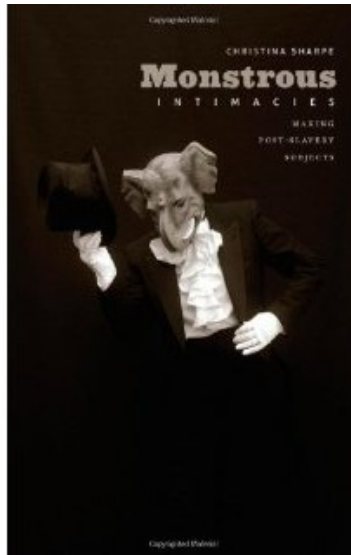


# Faculty Book Profile

## Monstrous Intimacies

By Christina Sharpe

*Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* by Associate Professor Christina Sharpe examines how the sexual violence of slavery and the subjugation of Black people have shaped the relations between Blacks and Whites today. The book explores the “monstrous intimacies,” or racialized and painful narratives, of several people and texts including Saartje Baartman (displayed in 19th century Europe as the “Hottentot Venus”), Aunt H/ Ester from Fredrick Douglass’ autobiography, and Gayl Jones’s novel *Corregidora*. Sharpe juxtaposes these analyses with texts that worked to oppress the mentioned subjects. *Monstrous Intimacies* challenges readers to learn about the history behind social and racial relationships.



## Alum Makes Gift to the English Department *continued from page 1*

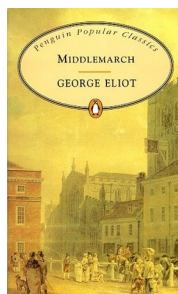
were derided as irrelevant and trivial, on the one hand, and as a threat to the survival of our system of cultural values on the other. The Humanities, it seems, can never be attacked for being worthless without that attack reinforcing just how important a role they play.

But the institutional hierarchies of universities tend to mirror the political hierarchies of the society around them. And this is never truer than when it comes to financial investment and reward. Not only are professors in the Arts and Humanities persistently paid less than their counterparts in other disciplines, but the Arts and Humanities are also, in most cases, allocated less money with which to run programs, pay speakers, or conduct ongoing research.

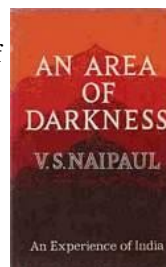
That’s why it’s all the more newsworthy when generous alums decide to invest in the Humanities and give something back to the discipline that shaped their ways of understanding the world. It is with great pleasure, therefore, that we recognize Jon Berger’s generous to the English Department. I remember Jon as an undergraduate in my class on American Poetry over 25 years ago. He was the sort of student in whom you could almost see the spark of passion ignite as he found his way into the words and the worlds of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century’s most important poets. Now, with his financial gift to the department, he is giving us another gift as well: the chance to catch up with him after all these years and to discover how deeply Tufts remains a part of his intellectual life. Along with his financial gift, that is, Jon has extended his generosity by providing a short sketch for Alumni Notes. All of us are deeply grateful to Jon for this wonderful donation to the English Department and for allowing us to support the programs that bring poets and other writers to Tufts so that new generations of students can awaken to the thinking that poetry enables and to the power and challenge of words that alter the means by which meaning is made. ∞

## Faculty Book and Film Recommendations

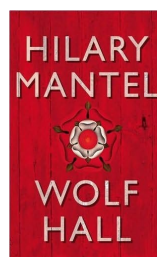
**Sonia Hofkosh** reread George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* last summer for pleasure. She says that it is “one of those books that just gets better each time you take it up. Here you will find some astonishing pages of insight into the workings of individual, as well as social psychology. The scene towards the end between Dorothea and Rosamund is well worth reading all the previous 776 pages. Read slowly and relish.”



**Ted Weesner**’s trip to India prompted interest in the films of Satyajit Ray, in particular the incredible *Apu Trilogy*, and returned him to the brilliance of V.S. Naipaul, with *An Area of Darkness* a new favorite.



**Jonathan Strong** recommends the recently reprinted novels of the Anglo-Irish writer Molly Keane and the delightful memoirs of Beverley Nichols.



**Michael Downing**

“I’ve read a couple of genuinely original novels...Victor Lavalle’s *Big Machine*, Salvatore Scibona’s *The End*--and one just about perfect book: *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel.”

# Faculty News and Publications

**Liz Ammons's** book, *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet*, was published last June by the University of Iowa Press. It's easy to get on Amazon, is priced affordably, and is written for the general reader as well as scholars.

**Linda Bamber's** poem "Beginning," from her collection of poems titled *Metropolitan Tang*, was selected last year by Barnes and Noble for National Poetry Month: [http://bnreview.barnesandnoble.com/t5/In-the\\_Margin/Beginning/ba-p/2452](http://bnreview.barnesandnoble.com/t5/In-the_Margin/Beginning/ba-p/2452).

**Daniel Bosch's** poem "Solutions to Autumn" was published in issue 194 of *The Paris Review*.

**Michael Downing's** memoir, *Life with Sudden Death*, was published in paperback last fall. He is at work on a new novel about the Italian painter Giotto. While in Rome and Padua for a few weeks last May he spent much of his time studying the astonishing fresco cycle Giotto painted in the Scrovegni Chapel.

**Kevin Dunn** published a short essay on Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* in the new Signet edition of the play, and a more substantial piece on Biblical Deuteronomistic history, which appeared in a special issue of the journal *Genre*, which he coedited.

**Lee Edelman**, who is working on a book tentatively titled *Bad Education*, gave lectures last year at Wesleyan University, American University, and the University of California at Berkeley, as well as at the annual Modern Language Association and American Comparative Literature Association conferences. A selection of his essays is being translated into French and a Spanish translation of his last book, *No Future*, is also in the works. He has an essay on Eve Sedgwick forthcoming in *Criticism* and a piece on *Hamlet* included in a collection entitled *ShakesQueer*.

**John Fyler** was the on-site Director of the Bread Loaf School of English at Lincoln College, Oxford, last summer. He was a Faculty Fellow at the Tufts Center for the Humanities this past year. His book *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun* (2007) came out in paperback last fall.

**Rebecca Kaiser Gibson** was selected for a Fulbright Scholars Award to teach poetry in Hyderabad, India during spring term 2011. Her poetry manuscript (then called *Proximities*) was a finalist for The Gerald Cable Poetry Award

from Silverfish press. In addition, her article on Deborah Digges, which appeared as "Fugitive Soul" in the Tufts Magazine Fall 2009, won a Bronze Award in the category "Best Articles of the Year: Higher Education," presented by CASE, the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education.

**Marcie Hershman** was a featured writer at the symposium, "Imagination and Catastrophe: Art and the Aftermath of Genocide," sponsored by the Center for Jewish History, New York City. Hershman gave a reading from her novel *Tales of the Master Race* and spoke on a panel along with filmmaker Atom Egoyan, poet Peter Balakian, critic R. Clifton Spargo, and genocide scholar Donna-Lee Frieze. Hershman's essay "Memoir: It's About Time" appears in the recently published teaching anthology, *Now, Write! Nonfiction*, edited by Sherry Ellis (Tarcher/Penguin). Her essay "No Burden to Bear," originally published in the *New York Times Magazine*, came out earlier in the anthology *Creative Nonfiction* (Cengage). Her review of Ursula Mahlendorf's *The Shame of Survival: Working through a Nazi Childhood* appears in last year's March/April issue of *The Women's Review of Books*.

**Joseph Litvak** published his book, *The Un-Americans: Jews, the Blacklist, and Stoolpigeon Culture*. He is now working on a sequel, whose working title is *Cold War Jew: Hollywood After the Blacklist*. He is also translating (into English) *Ahmed Philosophe*, or *Ahmed the Philosopher*, a comic play by the French philosopher Alain Badiou.

**Christina Sharpe's** book, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, was published in July 2010.



East Hall, current day

**Jonathan Strong's** eleventh book, *Consolation*, an academic comedy, was published last spring by Pressed Wafer and is available through Small Press Distribution ([spdbooks.org](http://spdbooks.org)) as is his previous novel *Drawn From Life*. He has two forthcoming novels: *More Light* (to appear this summer from Quale Press) and *Hawkweed and Indian Paintbrush* (scheduled for next winter from Pressed Wafer). He continues to teach summer school at the Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont and is still reading his way through Trollope and Zola. Though a confirmed Luddite, Jonathan does have a website, to be found at [jonathanwstrong.wordpress.com](http://jonathanwstrong.wordpress.com).

**Grace Talusan**, Lecturer and English major J'94, published "The Loneliest Thing on Earth," an essay on the state of Filipino novels in *The Rumpus* (<http://therumpus.net/2010/05/the-loneliest-thing-on-earth/>). Last summer, Grace published short stories in the anthologies *Walang Hiya* (Carayan Press) and *Art from Art* (Modernist Press). Listen to her read flash fiction, "The Girl in the Red Dress" in *The Drum*, an audio literary magazine at [http://drumlitmag.com/index.php?page=sounds&category=01--Issue\\_1.\\_May\\_2010&display=64](http://drumlitmag.com/index.php?page=sounds&category=01--Issue_1._May_2010&display=64).

**Ted Weesner's** work has appeared in the *Boston Globe* and *Washington Post*, in which he wrote about Calcutta.

**Jonathan Wilson's** novel *A Palestine Affair* appeared in Chinese translation in November 2010, and he lectured in five Chinese universities in Beijing, Chongqing, and Chengdung last fall.



East Hall ca. 1870

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## What are YOU doing now?

Have you written a book? Did you pursue another degree? Are you a lawyer, publisher, professor, full-time parent or TV producer?

Did you major in English and then become a doctor? Airplane pilot? Scuba instructor? Professional musician?

*We want to hear about it!*

Send us an e-mail at [English@tufts.edu](mailto:English@tufts.edu) and tell us what *you're* doing now!

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