Notes from the Chair

Joseph Litvak

Once again, I write just before Thanksgiving, as another semester seems to be flying by. Since the last chair’s letter, written soon after the election of Donald Trump, it has been a difficult and, for many, a traumatic year. For a lot of faculty, students, and staff here in the English department and elsewhere at Tufts, the privilege of working in a distinguished liberal arts university has come to seem surprisingly precarious in this past year. Indeed, the very privilege seems to arouse resentment and even rage, expressed both in apparently unorganized but no less brutal personal acts and at the highest, most official level of national policy.

As I noted a year ago, many people and groups of people—Muslims, immigrants, women, Latinos, African Americans, LGBT people, Jews, and others—found themselves experiencing an intensified sense of vulnerability. This sense of vulnerability has only been reinforced, of course, by the events of the past year (which, I’m not the first to observe, seems to have lasted much longer than one year). And yet, this situation of risk and threat has had an oddly energizing effect on many of us here in the Tufts English department.

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When so much in our politics now seems to be promoting America’s withdrawal into itself and away from the rest of the world, the teaching and the study of literature (and film, and any of the other cultural forms that we consider in our English courses) can be a valuable act of resistance to the shrinkage, the narrowing, and the hardening of borders that seem to be happening all around us since last November.
Recent Faculty Publications

We asked Department of English faculty to discuss their current research and to share their recent accomplishments, publications, and recommendations.

**Natalie Shapero:** My reading this summer has included *Broken River* (J. Robert Lennon), *Try Never* (Anthony Madrid), *The Mothers* (Brit Bennett), *The Trip to Echo Springs* (Olivia Laing), *Night Thoughts* (Wallace Shawn), and *The Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks* (ed. Peter Kahn, Ravi Shankar, and Patricia Smith). I’ve published poems this summer in *The New Yorker* and *Granta*, and I spent weekends seeing sand sculptures at Revere Beach, flying kites on Spectacle Island, and reading novels over people’s shoulders when the sound went out at the Cambridge Jazz Festival.

**John Lurz** was recently awarded tenure in the department. On the heels of that accomplishment, he has embarked on a new book, entitled *The Barthes Fantastic*, that examines the work of French critic Roland Barthes to articulate the way literature helps us make sense of the swirling chaos of sensory perception and social existence. He presented some preliminary remarks in this vein at the Modernist Studies Association conference in Amsterdam.

**John Fyler** was a Lecturer at the Bread Loaf School of English (Lincoln College, Oxford) this summer.

**Lisa Lowe:** In August, I traveled to Cape Town, South Africa to the annual meeting of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes; my presentation, “Global Humanities After Man,” described the project in comparative global humanities at the Center for the Humanities at Tufts (CHAT), which I direct. In the coming year, I will present my current research in various venues, including the Petrour Lecture at the University of Maryland, the Peggy Pascoe Memorial Lecture at the University of Oregon, and the Goldstone Lecture at New York University.

Lisa Lowe
Distinguished Professor

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Joseph Litvak presented two papers in the Netherlands this summer: “Comic Complicity” at the American Comparative Literature Association Convention in Utrecht, and “All-American: Jews and Comedy after Modernism” at the Modernist Studies Association Convention in Amsterdam. He is currently writing a book entitled Kingdoms of Comedy.

Ricky Crano: I’ve recently presented papers on the ideology of debt in social media and the “truth” in “fake news” at Theorizing the Web and the annual meeting of the Cultural Studies Association, respectively. I have an article on photography theory after social media, “The Real Terror of Instagram,” forthcoming in Convergence: International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies.

Grace Talusan, Lecturer, won the 2017 Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing, which as part of the prize, her first book will be published a year from now in fall 2018. Also, she was chosen as the author for the First-Year Reads Program at Johnson and Wales University in Providence, RI and will be giving a talk about a selection of her essays that their student body read over the summer on Wednesday, October 4 at 7PM.


Joseph Hurka, Lecturer, had his short story, “Crutcher,” published in the summer 2017 issue of Ploughshares, which was guest-edited by Stewart O’Nan. The story is part of a new collection tentatively titled The Jupiter Boy.
Rebecca Kaiser Gibson: My review of Fred Marchant’s *Said Not Said* was published in the *Los Angeles Review* in June. I have a poem forthcoming in the *Ocean State Review*. I’ve spent my summer working on a new manuscript tentatively called *The Gardener’s Labyrinth* - and getting ready for the new class I’m teaching this year. Also, luxuriating in the forest/mountain air.

David Valdes Greenwood: This summer, my new play *The Last Catastrophist* had readings with Company One in Boston and The Bechdel Project in New York, and a workshop with the Huntington Theatre Company. I finished the book and lyrics for *Mermaid Hour: ReMixed*, which opens in April at Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis, and is the musical version of my play *The Mermaid Hour*, which has upcoming productions in North Carolina, Arizona, and Oregon. When not writing, I was traveling with my daughter to Iceland, the UK, and France, and weeping as *Orphan Black* ended its five season story arc.

Marcie Hershman taught an intensive week-long writing workshop, “The Obstacle Course: Memoir and Creative Nonfiction,” this past July at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. She also gave a public reading at FAWC, sharing the stage with the poet Alan Shapiro and the artist Andrew Mockler. Two weeks later she returned to FAWC not as the expert but as the student, to take an exploratory drawing/painting workshop with the wonderful South African artist, Paul Stopforth.

Lynn Stevens has recently returned from Japan, where she has been teaching in a Faculty Development/ESL program for faculty at Kanazawa University. The online program is administered through the Tufts Office of International Programs and Partnerships.

What are YOU doing now?

Have you written a book? Did you pursue another degree? 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 email at English@tufts.edu and tell us what you’re doing now!
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Speaking for myself, I can say that it has sharpened my understanding of the importance of the critical perspective and the enlarged imagination that the humanities afford. Teaching a course on black comedy last spring, for example, I was repeatedly struck by how eloquently and how trenchantly a film like Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* or a novel like Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout* speak to our current moment. When so much in our politics now seems to be promoting America’s withdrawal into itself and away from the rest of the world, the teaching and the study of literature (and film, and any of the other cultural forms that we consider in our English courses) can be a valuable act of resistance to the shrinkage, the narrowing, and the hardening of borders that seem to be happening all around us since last November. I know I’m not the only member of the department who has felt this renewed sense of urgency about what we do as teachers and scholars of the humanities.

This will be my last chair’s letter, and I’d like to take this opportunity to thank the three wonderful staff members who have made my job so much easier, and who make life so much better for all faculty and students in the English department. Many of you know our brilliant Department Administrator, Wendy Medeiros, who makes sure day after day that our large and potentially chaotic department runs smoothly, and who performs this daily magic with kindness, tact, and good humor. Many of also know Douglas Riggs, one of our two Administrative Assistants, and if you know him, you know how much patience, calm, and quiet efficiency he brings to the life of the department. None of you, I suspect, knows our other Administrative Assistant yet, but I am happy to introduce you to Jennifer LeBlanc, who joined us just this past summer. Jennifer has established herself in only a few months as a talented, generous, and astute presence in the department, and we are delighted to welcome her into our community. It is Jennifer, I should point out, who has edited this newsletter, and who has done so superbly.

If you find yourself in the Boston area, please drop by East Hall to say hello and to bring us up to date on what you’ve been doing. Or drop us a line to share news, thoughts, favorite recent books, etc. You’re all very much part of the world to which we pride ourselves on staying connected.

Stay Connected
Visit our website: ase.tufts.edu/english
You’ll find news, events, and other goings-on about the Tufts English Department.
Edmond Caldwell, who passed away on 31 July 2017, received his Ph.D. from the English Department in 2002. His dissertation was titled *Pastoral Lost: Family Saga Narratives in Modern British Culture*, which he wrote under the supervision of Modhumita Roy. He resigned a tenure track position at Emmanuel College to devote his time and energy to creative writing. On his webpage he described his decision wryly: “Edmond Caldwell got a literature PhD from Tufts University and then decided he would prefer not to.” His work appeared in *West Wind Review*, *Mad Hatters’ Review*, *Sous les Pavés*, *Harp & Altar*, *DIAGRAM*, *3:AM Magazine*, *Word Riot*, *Chicago Review* and elsewhere. He was twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and his short play, *The Liquidation of the Cohn Estate*, was produced in the 2009 Boston Theater Marathon. His novel *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant* was published in 2012. One reviewer described it as "an astonishing, mind-bending novel—one that is as radical in form as it is in content, a book that should be read, discussed, taught, shared."

Edmond was a brilliant, widely and deeply read (especially in the Marxist tradition), creative person with a quirky sense of humor and an infectious irreverence for pieties. He had a subtle understanding of the meaning, value, and effectiveness of culture in the fight for change. Edmond’s commitment to radical politics permeated his scholarship, his teaching, and his writing. In his blog *The Chagall Position* ([http://thechagallposition.blogspot.com/](http://thechagallposition.blogspot.com/)), as well as in public hearings, he spoke out against gentrification and against the enthusiasm for the “branded zone” of the “Literary Cultural District” in Boston.

Family and friends, including members of the English Department, gathered at the Remis Sculpture Court on the 17th of September to remember Edmond.
Tufts Graduate Student Degree Awards and Job Placement
Summer 2016—Present

The past 18 months have been full of extraordinary achievements for our graduate students. With dissertations spanning seven centuries, touching upon various topics ranging from medieval literature to twentieth-century American poetry to environmental justice literature, Tufts students have contributed to a rich and diverse academic community. The job market for English students is fiercely competitive, but at Tufts we are pleased that our graduate students are finding success. Under the guidance of the Job Placement Director, Modhumita Roy, graduate students were hired for academic positions across the United States.

The following graduate students have recently secured job placements:

Cheryl Alison (G 2014): Part-Time Lecturer, Tufts University First-Year Writing Program
Charles Daniel Redmond (G 2017): Full-Time Lecturer, UMass Dartmouth Department of English
Adam Spellmire (G 2016): Part-Time Lecturer, Tufts University First-Year Writing Program
Jeffrey VanderVeen (G 2013): Full-Time Lecturer, UMass Lowell Department of English and Honors College

The following graduate students have recently defended their dissertations:

Kelvin Goh (April 2016): “A New Kind of Dignity: Self Empowerment Literatures of the Neo-Liberal Age”
Matthew Nelson (April 2016): “Speaking to be Overheard: Mid-Twentieth Century American Poetry and Problem of Address”
Adam Spellmire (April 2016): “Medieval Literature and Reading Addiction”
Seth Studer (May 2017): “Humanizing Literature: Cosmopolitanism and the Trope of the Critic”

The elephant drawings are from rosietea.blogspot.co.uk.