



Penn  
English

# NEWSLETTER



## WELCOME FROM THE CHAIR



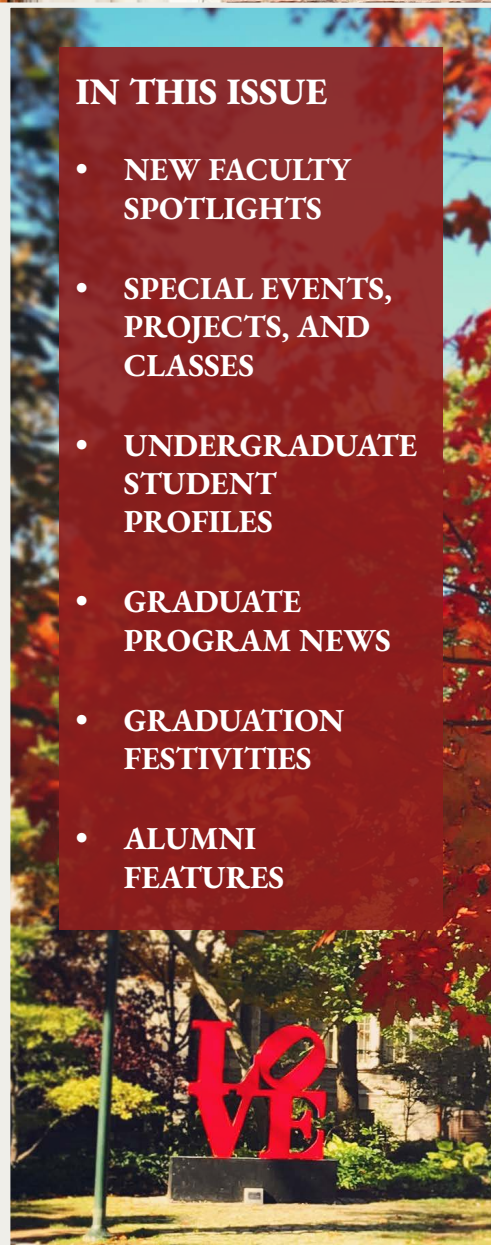
We hope this newsletter gives a glimpse of the tremendous energy in Penn English. The new academic year is in full swing and the department is thriving. Three new faculty members (Penn Presidential Compact Professor Bakirathi Mani, Assistant Professor Caroline (Caz) Batten, and Assistant Professor Sara Kazmi) have joined the department. The curriculum of Penn English continues to grow as professors develop new courses that are as dynamic as the signature courses that have defined the department for many years. Penn English courses demonstrate why literature matters and how literature connects to other cultural productions such as visual art and film. Our pedagogy places great emphasis on the portable skills that prepare English majors and minors for a range of post-undergraduate paths such as law school, journalism,

public policy, publishing, media and entertainment careers, secondary school teaching, and university professorships. Our graduate student program is as robust as our undergraduate program. Some of the most innovative courses allow undergraduates to learn alongside doctoral students. As featured in this newsletter, our undergraduate and graduate students are stunningly impressive and our faculty are dedicated, visionary teachers and scholars. Penn English remains a humanities hub within the School of Arts & Sciences: a point of intersection for literary studies, creative writing, media studies, race and ethnic studies, gender and sexuality studies, theater arts, and more.

**Margo Natalie Crawford**, Chair and Professor, Department of English  
Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Professor for Faculty Excellence

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# NEW FACULTY SPOTLIGHTS

## Bakirathi Mani

Bakirathi Mani is the Penn Presidential Compact Professor of English and core faculty in the Asian American Studies Program. Her areas of interest include Asian American, American, and South Asian Studies; visual cultural studies; museum and curatorial studies; postcolonial theory; transnational feminist and queer of color theory; and interdisciplinary methods of research in comparative race and ethnic studies.

Her book, *Unseeing Empire: Photography, Representation, South Asian America* (Duke University Press, 2020), earned an Honorable Mention Book Award from the Association of Asian American Studies in 2022. She is also the author of *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America* (Stanford University Press, 2012).

Mani earned her Ph.D. in Modern Thought and Literature from Stanford University, an M.A. in Modern Indian History from Jawaharlal Nehru University, and a B.S.F.S. in History and Diplomacy from Georgetown University.



## Caroline Batten

Caroline (Caz) Batten is Assistant Professor of Medieval English Literature and core faculty in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies. A scholar of Old English and Old Norse language and literature, their research interests include gender and sexuality, sickness and health, the history of medicine, and somatic emotions in medieval texts. Their monograph in progress, *By Word and Deed: Poetry and Process in the Old English Metrical Charms*, explores the verse, content, and rich cultural context of twelve protective magical incantations copied in English medical and religious manuscripts in the tenth and eleventh centuries. They are also the author of *Health and the Body in Early Medieval England* (Cambridge Elements, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2024), an introduction to early medieval English medical practice and conceptions of the body.

They received their B.A. from Swarthmore College and their M.Phil and D.Phil from the University of Oxford.



## Sara Kazmi

Sara Kazmi is Assistant Professor of Literature of the Global South. A literary scholar, translator, and performer, she takes a comparative and interdisciplinary approach to the study of Global South cultures of protest. She focuses on the Punjab region in North India, and more broadly, on South Asia and South Asian diasporas to focalise how marginal and vernacular literary production engages planetary debates around the questions of decolonisation, Marxism, and internationalism.

Professor Kazmi's scholarship is driven by a commitment to south-south collaboration, dialogue between political organising and research, and collective and alternative pedagogical forms.

She holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Cambridge, and an M.A. in History from SOAS, London.



# SPECIAL EVENTS, PROJECTS, AND CLASSES

## Cultures of the Book

BY LOUISA SHEPARD

A sought-after English class taught in the spring semester, [Cultures of the Book](#) approaches the concept of “book” broadly, covering the first written language on 5,000-year-old clay cuneiform tablets to computer coding on today’s digital electronic tablets.

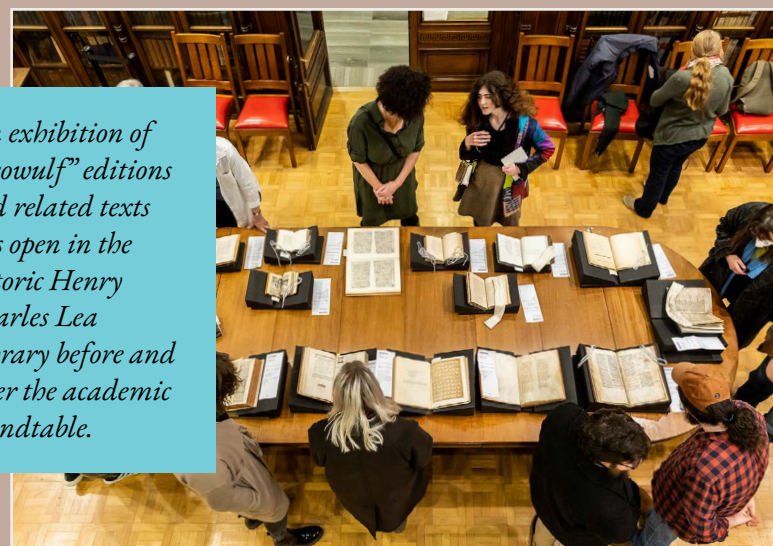
Students study books but also other forms of recording knowledge, such as Inca quipu made from knotted strings as well as scrapbooks, ephemera, and unique artist books.

“My main goal is to try to get them to think about the history of how human cultures have recorded and shared knowledge with each other, so we don’t think of the book as just the codex with a spine and leaves that you read from one point to another,” says [Whitney Trettien](#), assistant professor of English in the School of Arts & Sciences.

*Continue reading the profile of Professor Trettien’s course, which Undergraduate Chair Jean-Christophe Cloutier has described as “a dream scenario that reflects the evolving importance of English and the humanities,” in [this Penn Today article](#).*



*In the course Cultures of the Book taught by Whitney Trettien (center), students study materials in the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts in the Penn Libraries.*



*An exhibition of “Beowulf” editions and related texts was open in the historic Henry Charles Lea Library before and after the academic roundtable.*

## Medieval English Epic Poem ‘Beowulf’ Brought to Life

BY LOUISA SHEPARD

Around the year 1000, two monks took turns writing down the epic poem known as “Beowulf” in Old English, setting in ink the heroic tale that had been spoken in a storytelling tradition for hundreds of years. No one now knows who created the 3,182 alliterative lines, but the work is one of the most important and most translated known epics in history, often included on required-reading lists.

“Beowulf” came to the Penn Live Arts stage in a sold-out performance and to the Penn Libraries in an academic roundtable with School of Arts & Sciences’ English and

music professors, featuring the performer Benjamin Bagby, who uses his voice and a six-string harp to present the medieval text, evoking an ancient world.

*The coverage of this January event continues [in a Penn Today article](#) featuring highlights from the academic discussion at the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, including commentary from Penn English professors Caroline Batten and David Wallace.*



## ModPo Celebrates Its First Decade

BY LOUISA SHEPARD

Just before the webcast cameras went live to bring Kelly Writers House to the world, and the world to Kelly Writers House, Penn's Al Filreis scanned the crowd settling into the arts café, calling out name after name and where they had traveled from: Iowa and Florida, New York City and Chicago, even Spain.

The nearly 100 people gathered from near and far were there in October 2022 to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the open online Coursera course, Modern and Contemporary Poetry, known as ModPo, that Filreis, Kelly Writers House faculty director, created in 2012.

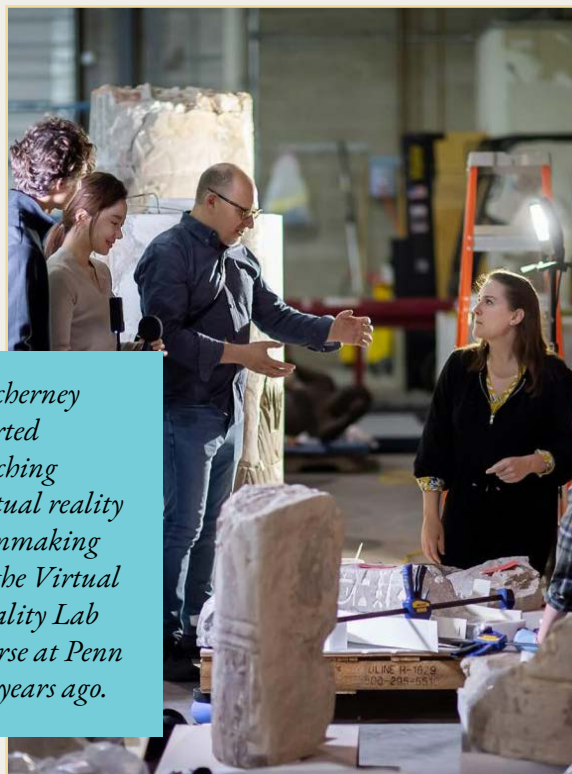
With six poets seated to his left at a long table and nine teaching assistants to his right on a television screen, Filreis counted down to click the cameras on and start the ModPo webcast.

"Hey, this is Al, and I'm here in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.," said Filreis, an English professor in the School of Arts & Sciences. "We are here because one way or the other everybody in this room believes in the crazy idea that poetic stuff and conversations and poems should be free and available to absolutely everybody."

*Read about the day-long celebration and launch of an anthology that grew from the course [in this Penn Today feature](#)*



*Modern and Contemporary Poetry, free on Coursera, was founded by Professor Al Filreis at Kelly Writers House in 2012 and now has 77,000 people enrolled from around the world.*



*Decherney started teaching virtual reality filmmaking in the Virtual Reality Lab course at Penn six years ago.*

## Virtual Reality in an Ancient World

BY LOUISA SHEPARD

Standing atop the scaffolding in the center of a closed gallery at the Penn Museum, conservator Molly Gleeson spoke facing a small camera on a tall tripod, in a few sentences explaining the yearslong project to select and conserve objects for the next step in the Building Transformation project—the Ancient Egypt and Nubia Galleries.

"I'm really excited to show you some of the behind-the-scenes conservation work we are doing," Gleeson said. Then she turned and asked "How was that?" to the filmmakers, all Penn students. They were emerging from behind towering stone columns, because the 360-degree virtual reality camera captures the entire space. It was their idea to have Gleeson on the scaffolding.

... The film starring Museum conservators was one of three made by teams of Penn students in [The Virtual Reality Lab course](#) taught in the spring semester by [Peter Decherney](#), professor of English and cinema and media studies in the School of Arts & Sciences. The films focus on the Museum conservators, curators, and senior archivist, telling their stories of engaging with the collection while working in their spaces.

*[Read the full article on Professor Decherney's Virtual Reality Lab, a recent feature from Penn Today, here](#), and learn about the three films produced using 360-degree cameras to capture the preparation to reimagine the Penn Museum's Ancient Egypt and Nubia Galleries.*

## Course taught by Professor of English Heather Love and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing Brooke O’Harra Brings Queer Archival Materials to Life

BY KAREN BROOKS

Early last February, Aubrey Shi pulled a directory of yellowing index cards from the John J. Wilcox, Jr., Archives at Philadelphia’s William Way LGBT Community Center. Among the text on each, she identified phone numbers and addresses for gay and lesbian organizations and bars. But what did the other jargon on some of them mean?

A rising junior double-majoring in English and Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, Shi discovered the terms she didn’t recognize were codes used within the gay community to disclose particulars about various establishments, like the clientele they catered to. “This showed how we have to piece together the histories of marginalized groups, because they had to stay hidden,” she says.

Shi was exploring the Wilcox Archives for a course that bridges Penn’s Department of English and Theatre Arts Program. Taught by Heather Love, Professor of English, and Brooke O’Harra, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, “Queer Archives, Aesthetics, and Performance” aims to familiarize students with using physical and digital archives to access information about LGBT and other minority histories, and then to re-imagine those histories through live performances.

Love and O’Harra have been offering the course, open to undergraduate and graduate students across the university, for four years, incorporating resources like the William Way Center, the Lesbian Herstory Archives and Franklin Furnace Performance Archive in New York, and Gale’s Archives of Sexuality and Gender online. Nine students spanning programs in the School of Arts & Sciences and the Stuart Weitzman School of Design participated in the latest session this past spring semester.

[\*Read the full article in OMNIA here.\*](#)



*Students attend the Queer Archives, Aesthetics, and Performance course.*



*Front row from left: Aaron Levy, James Pawelski, Marion Leary, Chris Gruits, and Anjan Chatterjee.*

## Multidisciplinary Panel Highlights Role of the Arts in Human Flourishing

BY BRANDON BAKER

In an introduction, Aaron Levy, a senior lecturer in the English and History of Art departments and director of Health Humanities Initiatives at Penn Medicine, showcased an unidentified Medieval painting that portrayed three “plague saints” during the era of the bubonic plague. It could be explained as a means of soliciting a sense of protection, or of gratitude for survival. It could, moreover, be seen as a way of learning of the burdens of the world.

“But also,” he said, art could be seen “as a means to navigate one’s own suffering.” That’s a practice that continues today, he explained, especially in times of our own plague.

[\*Read on in this Penn Today article, which covers the wide-ranging, multi-disciplinary dialogue from this past year.\*](#)



# UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT PROFILES

## Joelye Land

English major Joelye Land organized “Queer Joy for All Ages: LGBTQ+ Representation in Picture Books,” a pop-up exhibit during Pride Month on the first floor of the Van Pelt-Dietrich Library Center. As the Penn Libraries’ DEIA juvenile literature undergraduate research intern, she showcased picture books spanning from 1936 to 2021 in the pop-up and also curated a list of Young Adult novels for further reading. [In the post she authored for the Penn Libraries blog](#), Joelye writes, “I hope that this exhibit allowed everyone who stopped by to see queer joy represented on the page!”



## Olivia Lee

Olivia Lee, an English and Classical Studies double major, has been named a Price Mellon Undergraduate Fellow. During this past summer, she participated in an archaeological excavation in Italy and also worked on 3D modeling artifacts. Now that she is back on campus, she will build a website to hold data in a way that is accessible, interactive, and open-source. [Learn more about Olivia and about the Price Lab for Digital Humanities’ innovative uses of technology in the study of history, art, and culture.](#)



## Anusha Mathur

English major Anusha Mathur is the host of Penn’s newest podcast, *College Voices*. The podcast has just launched and is set to explore student life in the College of Arts and Sciences. Anusha will delve into the stories, experiences, and insights of students, faculty, and staff through interviews. As the podcast’s landing page advises, “tune in for a firsthand perspective on what it truly means to be a part of our vibrant academic community!” [Listen here.](#)



## Dushaun Thompson

A senior in the College, Dushaun Thompson spent this past summer doing legal research in Portugal as part of the Global Research and Internship Program (GRIP), which provides outstanding undergraduate and graduate students the opportunity to intern or conduct research abroad. Dushaun is now studying abroad at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo, Japan, and is a Global Correspondent for Penn Abroad. [Read his reflections on time spent at the University of Minho Law School.](#)



# GRADUATE PROGRAM NEWS

In 2022–2023, our graduate program celebrated 17 Ph.D. students rising to the ranks of “Dr.” Their dissertations, on topics ranging from medieval zoological treatises to theatrical adaptations of eighteenth-century novels to mathematical metaphors in contemporary Black experimental poetry, contribute to the progress of scholarship in their respective fields.

**Shoshana Adler**

*Tender Flesh: Race and Sensation in Late Medieval Literature*

**Matthew Aiello**

*Writing Under Duress: Trauma and Repetition in Early England, 1065–1250*

**Máyòwá Ajibade**

*Uses of the Eccentric: Reading the Political in African and African American Experimental Writing*

**Aaron Bartels-Swindells**

*Impossible Realisms: Genre and Apartheid, 1902–1973*

**David Buchanan**

*Global Domesticities: The Family Drama and the Capitalist World-Economy*

**Kenton Butcher**

*Ain't No Shame: Contemporary Passing Narratives in African American and South African Literature*

Additionally, we marked the graduation of 3 M.A. students (from left): Zabra Narvel, Grace Tierney, and Caitlin Evans.

**Joseph Coppola**

*Not Your Average Joe: Hollywood's Data Wars*

**Destiny Crockett**

*Womanish Girls and Black Girl Vulnerability in African American Women's Cultural Productions: 1970–2005*

**Devin William Daniels**

*Informatic States: Administration, Identity, and Surveillance in the U.S. Novel, 1940–1977*

**J. Felix Gallion**

*Camp Carcerality: On Abolition and Ethnic Mexican Agricultural Labor Migration*

**Cassidy Holahan**

*Dramatizing the Novel: Transmedial Exchange in the Long Eighteenth Century*

**Amber Rose Johnson**

*Bad Mathematics: Black Experimental Poetry and Performance in 21st Century Diaspora*

**Dahlia Menghui Li**

*Caress without Body: Stranded Affect, Queer Diasporic Dancing, and Questions Concerning Technology*

**jess lamar reece holler**

*Psychologically Ultimate Background: the Environmental Politics of Ambient Media*

**A.V. Aylin Malcolm**

*Every Living Soul: Literature and Zoology in England, 1100–1400*

**Alex Millen**

*Novel Aspirations: Social Imperialism and the Remaking of the English Working Class, 1848–1914*

**Jane Robbins**

*Waterworks: Settler Industrialization and Literary Experimentation in Twentieth-Century North America*



# GRADUATION FESTIVITIES

## English Majors

At the 2022–2023 End-of-Year Party, Professor Jean-Christophe Cloutier announced the Department of English Undergraduate Award Winners to students, faculty, and staff assembled in Fisher-Bennett Hall's Judith Rodin Undergraduate English Lounge.

Among the annual prizes for best essays on literature of the English renaissance, on American literature, and more, Cloutier revealed the winner of a one-time special contest. To celebrate the 400th anniversary of the publication of the First Folio of William Shakespeare, the Department of English invited students to pen their own original sonnets. The winner, Wes Matthews, a May graduate of the College, received a prize of \$250, and a hand-printed broadside of his sonnet produced by the Common Press.

[Read \*The Daily Pennsylvanian's\* coverage of the prize and event here.](#)





# ALUMNI FEATURES

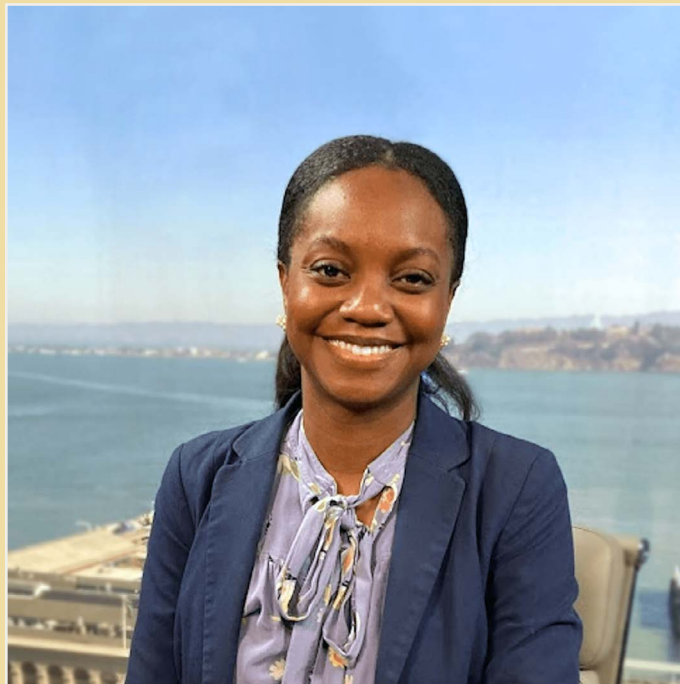
## Sara Hansson, Class of 2023

Sara Hansson was featured in a special School of Arts & Sciences series called *Pathways*, which highlights the academic journeys of students in the College and the transformational moments that have shaped their intellectual experiences.

The article details Sara's journey from the time that she came to Penn, intending to study earth science, to the time that she graduated, a double major in Economics and English with a concentration in Medieval and Renaissance studies in the College of Arts and Sciences, as well as a major in legal studies at the Wharton School. She describes how the inspiration to change her path came from an Intro to Shakespeare course taught by Phyllis Rackin, Professor of English Emerita, and how she continued to find great value in her English classes, especially in one on Icelandic sagas taught by Caroline Batten, Assistant Professor of English. A May 2023 graduate, Sara is staying nearby for the next few years as she completes her J.D. at Penn's Carey Law School.



[Read Sara's \*Pathways\* piece—complete with bonus video content—here.](#)



## Sonie Guseh Osagie, Class of 2010

Sonie Guseh Osagie authored an essay for the School of Arts & Sciences *At Work* series, reflecting on the ways in which her major in English and minor in Hispanic Studies have been foundational for her career.

As Senior Director of Strategy and Operations at CNBC, Sonie writes about the range of companies she has worked with in her role, the variety of projects she's helped launch, including the development of CNBC's award-winning daily news podcast, *Squawk Pod*, and the passion and preparedness for content creation and audience engagement that resulted from her time at Penn.

"I am excited by the opportunities in the media industry and the ability to create content that informs and inspires audiences," Sonie writes. "My freshman-year self had no idea that there were jobs like this out there."

[See Sonie's full \*At Work\* essay here.](#)

## CALLING ALL PENN ENGLISH ALUMNI

Are you interested in becoming a Penn English Major Mentor?  
Visit the [Alumni page of our website](#) to find out more.