



Penn
English

NEWSLETTER



WELCOME FROM THE CHAIR



Penn English is thriving. As of July 1, 2024, Professors Whitney Trettien and Simone White began their tenured appointments as Associate Professor. With these tenure promotions, Penn English has secured an even stronger profile in the fields of poetics, book history, and digital humanities. We are conducting a national search for an assistant professor in Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century. Our fall 2024 Indigenous Studies lecture series will bring prominent scholars who will explore the most vibrant new directions in Native American and Indigenous Studies. Our faculty members continue to be among the most influential and honored scholars in the profession at large. Herman Beavers is the 2026 president-elect of the Modern Language Association, the leading organization for literary studies. Our professors continue to be the most frequent teaching prize winners in the School and in the University as a whole. We have expanded

our course offerings at the undergraduate and graduate levels. 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 and 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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ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

Jennifer Egan

At the first of a series of events across campus, Pulitzer Prize-winning author (and alum!) Jennifer Egan spoke with student host Jean Paik (C'24) about the path to becoming a novelist, her writing process, and the importance of the English major, particularly in this moment in time. The event, which took place in a jam-packed lounge in Fisher-Bennett Hall, kicked off Egan's year-long residency with the Department of English, which included a wildly popular Spring semester course on [the art of fiction](#).

Egan also joined a special faculty panel to discuss *The Candy House* (*New York Times* Top 10 Books of 2022; President Obama's Favorite Books of 2022), her most recent novel, as part of the year's Winter Reading Project. All students in attendance received a free copy of the text a month ahead of the event to engage with Egan's work in preparation for the discussion.

In a packed room in the Kelly Writers House at the end of the academic year, Egan and Dennis Culhane, a professor in the School of Policy & Practice, discussed homelessness, an issue that Egan has covered in her journalistic writing for many years (her most recent long-form piece appeared in *The New Yorker* last September—“[Off the Street: A journey from homelessness to a room of one's own in New York City](#)”).

Egan's participation in Penn life during the 2023–24 academic year has resulted in an explosion of excellent news coverage, from *Penn Today* to *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. See below for highlights about our artist-in-residence:

- [The English major's cheerleader and champion](#), by Louisa Shepard, *Penn Today*
- [Supporting Supportive Housing](#), by JoAnn Greco, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*
- [Jennifer Egan's Homecoming: A Writer's Journey Back to Penn](#), by Luiza Louback (C'26), *34th Street Magazine*



SPECIAL EVENTS, PROJECTS, AND CLASSES

Measuring Readers of Romance

BY LOUISA SHEPARD

A team of researchers at the [Price Lab for Digital Humanities](#) has studied thousands of avid readers and the hundreds of thousands of books in their collections and discovered that romance, often dismissed by academics, is a uniquely “large, complex, and dynamic” genre and “a vital part of the literary system.”

The project studies the contemporary tastes and habits of readers by using the [Goodreads](#) social book-collection site.

“Romance is the juggernaut of contemporary literature, standing out from all other genres in its sheer scale and in the wild diversity of its subgenres,” the team wrote in the article “[Genre Juggernaut: Measuring ‘Romance’](#)” published in [Public Books](#), a literary magazine. “Romance is the genre of genres, a veritable genre ecosystem in its own right.”

[Continue reading this Penn Today coverage](#) on research conducted by James English, John Welsh Centennial Professor of English and founding faculty director of the Price Lab for Digital Humanities, as well as by Dr. J.D. Porter, Digital Humanities Specialist and lecturer in the Department of English.



Author Celeste Ng and The Questions That Drive Her

BY KRISTINA GARCÍA

Three questions drive Celeste Ng, a literary powerhouse with three novels to her name: What is the nature of legacy? What is does it mean to belong or to feel other? And what is the role of art and what are the limitations on its power?

“They’re the questions I deal with every day,” Ng said to a group of Penn students on March 27 at the Yoonmee Chang Memorial Lecture, organized by the Asian American Studies Program (ASAM). “I go to writing because there’s something I don’t understand and I’m trying to figure it out on the page.”

The annual lecture honors Yoonmee Chang, who received her Ph.D. in English in 2003 from Penn, where she was active in the founding of the Asian American Studies Program. Chang went on to publish “Writing the Ghetto: Class, Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave” and was associate professor of English at George Mason University when she died in 2018, said Fariha Khan, co-director of the ASAM, who introduced Ng.

In conversation with [David L. Eng](#) and Lynnea Bao, a third-year student at the Wharton School from Oakland, California, the author of “Everything I Never Told You,” “Little Fires Everywhere,” and “Our Missing Hearts” spoke about her writing process, the model minority stereotype, and what Reese Witherspoon is really like in person.

This event coverage continues [in this Penn Today article](#).

Medieval Manuscript

BY MICHELE W. BERGER

For the past year, Emily Steiner, Rose Family Endowed Term Professor of English, and a team of graduate students have transcribed, translated, and interpreted a scroll that chronicles the genealogy of Yorkist king Edward IV.

Most family trees that trace back hundreds of years are extensive. But 16 feet long unfurled? That's the footprint of the Edward IV Roll, which was created in the early 1460s and has been at the Free Library of Philadelphia for more than 85 years. This medieval manuscript chronicles the genealogy of Yorkist king Edward IV, starting with Adam and Eve. For the past year, Emily Steiner and a team of graduate students—Emma Dyson in the Department of Classical Studies, and Noa Nikolsky and Ariel Bates in the Department of English—have been transcribing, translating, and interpreting the scroll, thanks to a grant from the Richard III Society American Branch. “These rolls are in Latin, and they are handwritten, often in a cramped style to fit the words into odd spaces,” Steiner says. There are both standard and non-standard abbreviations to contend with, in addition to deciphering what Steiner calls the document’s “propagandistic” intentions. “History gets massaged in these rolls,” she says. “It’s intriguing for the students to see how many different ways there are to record the past.” It’s been a labor of love, she adds. By fall 2024, the team’s translation will be fully digitized by Penn Libraries.



See gorgeous high-resolution images of the medieval scroll in [the Spring/Summer 2024 issue of OMNIA](#), available here.



Through First-Year Seminar, A Glimpse of Black Queer Traditions

BY BRANDON BAKER

Stepping into his Black Queer Traditions class, [Dagmawi Woubshet](#) says, feels like entering a concert hall. He can feel the murmur of an orchestra tuning, as students laugh and talk and bond at a time of morning often suited to sleeping, ready to be swept away in the ensuing discussion of luminaries like James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Barry Jenkins, and more.

“I wish I’d had this class when I was a freshman,” says Woubshet.

Woubshet, the Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Endowed Term Associate Professor of English, taught the first-year seminar Black Queer Traditions for the first time in the fall 2023 semester, supported by a First-Year Seminar Grant from [The Sachs Program for Arts Innovation](#) and the College of Arts & Sciences. Woubshet led a group of 15 students in discussions surrounding Black queer literature, art, and politics, ranging from the Harlem Renaissance to works of the present—one as recent as “Fat Ham,” a Pulitzer Prize-winning play that reimagines Hamlet through the lens of a young queer Black man, written by James Ijames and staged at Center City’s Wilma Theater in December.

Read the full article on Professor Woubshet’s First-Year Seminar, a recent [feature from Penn Today](#), here.

Exploring Jane Austen and Taylor Swift Through Their Writing As Teenagers

BY LOUISA SHEPARD

Modern-day superstar songwriters Taylor Swift and Chance the Rapper have much in common with 18th- and 19th-century superstar novelists Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. Although writing 200-plus years apart, these and other creators showed great promise when they were young, producing remarkable works before the age of eighteen, as Penn students found in *Juvenilia*, a new first-year English course in the fall semester.

“I was thinking about the fact that a lot of these creators and influencers and important writers and musicians were the same age as my students, or younger, when they started out,” says [Melissa Jensen](#), who has taught English and writing at Penn for 15 years. Rather than use these early works as adjuncts to other studies, she thought, “Why not concentrate on it?”

[Jean-Christophe Cloutier](#), undergraduate chair of the English Department, says that when Jensen proposed *Juvenilia*, he immediately wanted it be a first-year seminar, saying “the unique beauty” of the course is that students would encounter writings composed by authors who were about their age at the time.

“What’s it like to read what Jane Austen was writing when she was my age? How does this compare to, say, Taylor Swift’s earliest lyrics?” says Cloutier, associate professor of English and comparative literature. “The potential for our students to make personal connections across time and space with major literary figures was so high that I knew we could not pass up the opportunity to offer this course.”

Find out more about Jensen’s popular first-year seminar in [this Penn Today profile](#).



‘Be Holding’: A Collaboration That Feels Improvisational

BY LOUISA SHEPARD

It was five years ago when poet [Ross Gay](#) visited his friend [Brooke O’Harra](#), who teaches creative writing at Penn, and started to tinker with an unfinished poem while sitting on the porch of her West Philadelphia rowhouse.

The piece was “[Be Holding](#),” which would become an award-winning book-length poem on Black genius and racial justice, published in 2020. “Be Holding” is an ode to legendary basketball

player Julius Erving—known as Dr. J—who dominated courts in the 1970s and ’80s as a forward for the Philadelphia 76ers.

A conversation on the porch was the beginning of a collaboration that would turn that poem into a conceptual production—one read by two poet performers, in concert with original music composed by Penn Professor [Tyshawn Sorey](#) and played by [Yarn/Wire](#), a music quartet in residence at Penn, and student-actors from a Philadelphia high school. And all of it put together by O’Harra, the director.

Learn more about the super-successful “Be Holding” project in [this Penn Today profile](#).

UNDERGRADUATE INTERNSHIPS

This year, Penn English launched an internship program specifically for current majors and minors. We partnered with our very own alums to place four undergrads into unique professional positions across the U.S. We look forward to expanding on these summer opportunities in future years and [welcome our alumni to reach out](#) should they be interested in recruiting current students for these roles. The Department wishes, on behalf of our students, to thank the following alumni for the generosity of their vision: Sara Gorman, Jack Gorman, Katie Liberman, Eugene Park, Scott Tenley, and Roe Wiczak.

Mame Balde, Summer 2024 Intern at Full Spectrum Features

Rising senior Mame Balde spent the summer working as a production intern for Full Spectrum Features, a Chicago-based nonprofit committed to increasing diversity in independent film by producing, exhibiting, and supporting the work of women, BIPOC, disabled, and LGBTQIA+ filmmakers. Founded by Penn English alum Eugene Sun Park, FSF seeks to transform the entire media landscape.

Mame, a double major in English and Cinema & Media Studies, spent the summer attending production meetings with emerging filmmakers, and provided comprehensive notes and coverage on scripts for both film and television.



Emanuel Barrett, Summer 2024 Intern at Critica Inc

Entering his senior year as a pre-med student minoring in English, Emanuel Barrett spent this past summer as a research intern for Critica Science. Founded by Penn alumni Drs. Sara and Jack Gorman, Critica is a non-profit organization dedicated to counteracting scientific misinformation and understanding health science denial. As Critica's research intern, Emanuel worked alongside Dr. Jack Gorman to build a manuscript titled "Traditional and Novel Features of Community-Oriented Motivational Interviewing." Throughout the summer, Emanuel reviewed examples of online interventions on TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly known as Twitter) to exemplify a new version of motivational interviewing (MI) used in online communities (COMI). The goal of this paper is to show how COMI helps inform individuals in the online community to make better informed healthcare decisions. Dr. Gorman and Emanuel will continue working together to prepare their paper for publication submission.



Mikayla Cassidy, Summer 2024 Intern at Trinity Rep Theater

New Penn graduate Mikayla Cassidy ('24) spent the summer as an intern at Trinity Repertory Company, the State Theater of Rhode Island, which stages nationally recognized theater productions, organizes community engagement programming, manages a professional artistic and resident company, offers graduate training programs in partnership with Brown University, and delivers arts education programs for students in grades K-12.

Mikayla worked directly with Trinity's Executive Director, Katie Liberman—a fellow Penn English alum. Over the summer, Mikayla developed an in-depth understanding of each of the unique divisions that are necessary for a non-profit theater to operate and thrive. This Fall, she will start a Master's program in Education Policy at the Graduate School of Education at Penn, with the hopes of eventually combining her love for theater and education in her future career.



Mallika Tatavarti, Summer 2024 Intern at MRC Entertainment

Rising senior Mallika Tatavarti spent the summer interning at MRC Entertainment in Los Angeles, California. MRC is a leading entertainment studio that develops, produces, and finances many of the world's most iconic TV series, films, and documentaries, from *Knives Out* to *Ozark*.

Mallika worked with both the television and film teams, and had the opportunity to learn from executives by covering phones, reading about a million scripts and discussing them with execs, shadowing pitches and table reads, researching talent and IP for upcoming projects, and more. She and the other interns ended their summer by building a full pitch for one of the films on MRC's slate, and presenting it to company execs! Her favorite part about the experience was getting to know the MRC community and building relationships with the amazing people there.



GRADUATION FESTIVITIES

English Majors, Class of 2024

On May 2, 2024, 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. Prof. Cloutier also introduced the inaugural class of Diane Hunter First-Year English Prize winners. Recipients of this award were first-year students recognized for outstanding work in an English course.

See below for a complete list of this year's departmental undergraduate award winners.

COLLEGE ALUMNI SOCIETY HENRY REED PRIZE, for the best essay written by an undergraduate on the literature of the English Renaissance

Samara Himmelfarb, "A Woman Who is not Eminently Good: the Tragedy of Eve in *Paradise Lost*"

DIANE HUNTER FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH PRIZE, for outstanding work in an English course by a first-year student

Aiden Argueta
Jett Bolker
Tasnim Chelbi
Madison Knier
Ashwin Laksumanage

Sarah Jane Leonard
Michelle Lu
Nathalie Mejia
Chloe Norman
Poppy Wagner

DOSORETZ FAMILY PRIZE, for the best essay written by a graduating senior English major

Elizabeth Shuert, "The Untranslatable: Philosophies of Language in *Se questo e un uomo* and *The Divine Comedy*"

L. BARRY PICK PRIZE, awarded for the best thesis assembled by a student in the English Honors Program

Cagney Kelshaw, "*Dweorgas* and *Dvergir*: Disease, Disorder, and Deviance in Old English and Norse Literature"

NANCY RAFETTO LEACH SWEETEN PRIZE, for the best undergraduate essay on American literature

Paola Naughton, "Civil is Uncivil"

Honorable Mention: Celine Choi, "The Perils of the Acculturation Gap: How Asian American Childhoods are Weaponized in the Neoliberal Racial Project"

PHILLIP E. GOLDFEIN CLASS OF 1934 SHAKESPEARE PRIZE, for the best undergraduate essay on Shakespeare

Weike Li, "Surrender of Fictionality to Forfeiture of Writerly Will"

RITTENBERG PRIZE AND FLAG BEARER, for overall excellence and achievement by a Senior English Major

Jean Paik

BEST UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT SERVICE AWARD, for outstanding performance of student services in the English Department

Sabrina Cho
Jenny Fu



Ph.D. Program

In 2023–2024, our graduate program celebrated 13 Ph.D. students rising to the ranks of “Dr.” Their dissertations, on topics ranging from medieval medical treatises to representations of motherhood in early twentieth-century America to the role of race in animation, all contribute to the progress of scholarship in their respective fields.

Muriel Bernardi

The Political Malady: Embodied Belonging in British Fiction, 1796-1860

Mark Firmani

Translating Genre: Contemporary Iraqi Fiction and Critiques of International Law

Knar Gavin

“Fend for Meaningful Speech”: Matters of Social Fact in Post-9/11 Documentary Poetry

Matty Hemming

Refusing Motherhood: Race, Class, and the Literary History of Reproductive Healthcare

Ann Ho

Novel Infrastructures: Urban Literary Forms in Lagos, Johannesburg, and Mumbai

Kirsten Lee

Scenes of Speculation: Abolition and the Movement Literatures of Black North America, 1783-1876

Nico Millman

Race, Dispossession, and Revolution: Literatures from India and the Americas in the Twentieth Century

Joel Newberger

Robert Duncan: The Structure of the Field

Noa Nikolsky

Governing Bodies: The Regimen Sanitatis in Late Medieval Europe

Jenna Nordness

Sharp Minds and Sharper Tongues: Proverbs, Class, and Social (Dis)Order in Late-Medieval English Literature

Ethan Plaue

Media Vita: Race, Romanticism, and the History of Mediation, 1785-1885

Joseph Earl Thomas

Black Affect and Ludonarrative Dissonance in the Present

JS Wu

The Animating Inbetween: Producing Race in Popular Animation



M.A. Program

Additionally, we marked the graduation of six M.A. students:

Claire Hou

Sophia Liu

Sofia Varela-Hernandez

Grace Warren

Matteo Akbarpour

Gabriella Raffetto

FACULTY IN THE NEWS

Charles Bernstein, Donald T. Regan Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature, reflects on the passing of Marjorie Perloff, Leading Scholar of Avant-Garde Poetry, [in this piece from *The New York Times*](#).



Senior Lecturer Lorene Cary adapted her memoir *Ladysitting* for the stage at Arden Theatre Company. *abcNews* profiled the production for viewers across the tri-state area; [watch the coverage here](#).



A collector donated 75,000 comic books to Penn Libraries, valued at more than \$500,000. **Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature Jean-Christophe Cloutier** weighs in—[read all about in this *Philadelphia Inquirer* article](#).



The Future of Decline, by **Vartan Gregorian Professor of English Jed Esty**, was named one of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s Best Scholarly Books of 2023. [The full list of winners is available on their website](#).



Senior Lecturer Paul Hendrickson donated his papers to the Special Collections department at William & Mary's Swem Library. [Read about Hendrickson's literary legacy in this *Virginia Gazette* piece](#).

