



Annotations

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Ripple Effects

ENGLISH ON CAMPUS AND BEYOND

University Communications



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LETTER FROM THE CHAIR



Russ Castronovo

An apocryphal—but no doubt true—story has it that one evening in the Lakeshore dorms, three first-year students were having a late-night discussion about their hopes for the future. The transcript of their conversation looks like this:

Student 1: I think that I am going to major in biology so that I can go to medical school.

Student 2: My plan is to major in political science and then go to law school.

Student 3: I am going to major in English. My parents want me to get a job and have a career.

This charming little story captures what the generations of alumni who graduated with a degree in English from UW–Madison already know. Critical thinking, communication skills, and especially creativity are fostered by the deep engagement with language and literature that we all share. As a member of our alumni Board of Visitors who had gone on to great success in Silicon Valley told me years ago, “We can teach new employees the technical skills that they need to have. What we can’t teach them is how to write.” His point is that tech knowledge is easy to come by in comparison to effective communication skills, which are best developed and honed over years of talking about Langston Hughes in seminars or banging out a paper on Virginia Woolf (hopefully not the night before it’s due).

But enough with the campus lore and hearsay. In this issue, we are delighted to profile two alumni who have used the English major as a springboard. You can read about Scott Astrada’s career in Washington, DC, and Jonah Engel Bromwich’s path to *The New York Times* on pages 8 and 9.

Like Scott and Jonah, UW–Madison English alumni also know that in the end our life-long passion for books can’t and shouldn’t be boiled down into a list of skills suitable for a résumé. We know too well the errors of Dickens’s notorious schoolmaster Thomas Gradgrind to think that the value of English can be ground down into a set of narrowly utilitarian skills and facts.

On, Wisconsin!
Russ Castronovo

Annotations is the alumni newsletter of the Department of English at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

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YOUR SUPPORT MAKES A DIFFERENCE



John Karl Scholz, Dean, College of Letters & Science

If spring is a time of hope and growth and new beginnings, then spring came early here in L&S. In February, we celebrated the grand opening of SuccessWorks, the new career center designed just for L&S students, now occupying a sleekly-designed space on the third floor of the University Bookstore. The event brought together students, alumni, state government representatives, UW System Regents, donors and business leaders.

After the ribbon-cutting, Chancellor Blank told a packed room:

“This space is going to transform how we prepare liberal arts students for careers, and bring us that much closer to our goal of integrating career readiness into students’ experiences while they are here on campus.”

I hope that you share my deep gratification at those words. When we launched the L&S Career Initiative in 2014, we dreamed of a place where students from any of the college’s 62 undergraduate majors—and at any point in their university experience—could come to explore and build connections between academics, personal interests, and professional skills.

I am proud of the education we provide in L&S and of the students we have the privilege of working with. I hope you share that pride. After all, it’s your success that we are building on.

Check out SuccessWorks online at careers.ls.wisc.edu to read news coverage of our grand opening. And next time you’re on campus, stop by for free coffee! Staff love to network with alums and talk about our successes, challenges, and dreams for our students.

On, Wisconsin!

Dean John Karl Scholz





Memories of Cyrena Pondrom, Emerita

Dear Annotations,

I was one of Cyrena Pondrom's first students at UW. She taught an honors Comp Lit class in the fall of 1967, my first semester as a freshman. WOW! What a dynamite teacher. As a boomer, do I have permission to quote Paul Simon? She blew that room away! I had a lot of great teachers throughout my UW career, but she is at the top of the list. The reading list she put together for that class still sticks with me to this day. At the time, I was debating among seven different majors, including physics! She was a major factor in making me an English major, and I still consider myself an English major. I will always be grateful for her inspiring class and subsequent advising. I could tell from that first day that she'd have a huge impact on the university, and she sure has.

Bill Kasdorf, '71

Hello, Annotations!

I happened to be remembering Professor Pondrom aloud just the other day in a reading group run by an English department colleague. We were discussing an interview with Octavio Paz in which Paz referred to "the frightening idea" of "the world as a broken text." I was reminded of sitting in Prof. Pondrom's graduate class in Women and Modernism in fall 1989, listening to her talk about how women modernist writers teach us that women had never had as much cause to be invested in that romantic idea of the once-whole world in the first place.

It has turned out to be a sort of backbone idea for me in the rest of my intellectual life since then. I appreciate the chance I had to study with so many impressive women scholars, in particular, at Madison; they were all important role models for me, even if I was too shy to ever tell them or show it.

**Sincerely,
Cara Diaconoff, MA English, 1990**

Susan Bernstein's Retirement

Dear Annotations,

I wanted to express how much I enjoy and remember the "Sensation Fiction" class I took with Dr. Bernstein in 1992. It is probably my favorite class of my college career and I still have all the paperbacks!

I enjoyed my English classes at UW and they greatly enriched my business major. I have worked in marketing and advertising since graduation, but I use the writing and critical thinking skills of my English major every day.

**Thanks again, Dr. Bernstein.
Lea Kyle Turnbull, BBA/BA '93**

Book Clubs and Reading Groups— a Lifetime of Reading

Dear Annotations,

I have belonged to many different book clubs for the past five decades. Some were really an excuse for a group of young mothers to escape into each other's company to discuss a book, while others were more serious literary discussions among neighbors. Reading is as important to me as breathing. I always have a nightstand with multiple books and always know what I will read next.

I cherish my education from the English Department. It seemed somewhat irresponsible at the time—what would I do with an English major? I find I can write and express myself with ease where others struggle—things that served me so well throughout my life.

Power to the English Majors!

**Gratefully,
Laurie Huffaker Glowac, BA '69, MS '73**

WE LOVE HEARING FROM ALUMNI!

Direct your missives to
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* Letters published in Annotations may be edited for clarity and length.

MELANIN SPEAKING: COMMUNITY IN THE FLESH

MAKING SPACE FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR ON CAMPUS

Melanin Speaking is no ordinary student publication or campus organization. It's a phenomenon. Taking campus conversation about race and identity to a new level, Melanin Speaking makes spaces, both virtual and in the flesh, for students to speak about their experiences as people of color on a predominately white campus. They find expression in poetry, prose spoken word performance, photography, and visual arts.

For president and co-founder Sam Adams, and outreach coordinator Manny Cerda, the growth of Melanin Speaking has given them a feeling of belonging at UW–Madison. By drawing on support from the English Department, other departments, and student orgs to help the publication grow, Sam and Manny have become more professionally and personally involved in campus life. They want to extend this sense of belonging to the journal's contributors. “We want to demonstrate that there are resources for students of color on campus,” Manny says.

One place of belonging is the virtual home of Melanin Speaking: melaninspeaking.wordpress.com. Past issues have invited contributors to think about “(In)visibility” and “The Colors of Gender and Sexuality.” Coming up for Spring 2018 is “Family & Home.” Reading through the issues, one is struck by the intensity of emotion—anger, longing, and the passion of grappling with language that both confines and liberates. Submission guidelines seek prose that “Is messy and complicates (in all the necessary ways)” and poetry that is “as dirty, funny, or as deliberate as you wish.” Sam explains that “we want artists

to share the truth—not to make a spectacle out of people's stories.”

Beyond the website, Melanin Speaking is also what Sam calls “a community in the flesh.” Their first Open Mic Mixer at ZuZu Café attracted over fifty people from the university, and beyond: “One person actually came from the airport during her layover!” Manny laughs. The power of presence had its impact: the group hosted a second mixer in February, and hopes to continue the open mics on a monthly basis. The success of the mixers comes down to the raw, no-holds-barred nature of its performances which, Manny later realized, ought to come with a content warning.

With its recent successes and publicity—Sam gave an interview on WORT 89.9 FM, and the *Badger*

Herald published a write-up—the group is turning its attention to recruitment. Sam and Manny, as well as the entire staff, are seniors. Sam looks ahead to graduate studies, and Manny to studying abroad in Peru, but both want to stay involved in Melanin Speaking in an advisory capacity. In addition to the platform they've built together, the group also has a vision to pass forward. They want to see an official Melanin Speaking website, and for the journal to appear in print—and maybe even an office in Helen C. White. “I want us to be a force on this campus that people recognize just as they recognize *Madison Review* or *Illumination*,” Manny says. “I want us to be something that students of color are proud to be a part of.”

— Lauren Hawley



Manny Cerda (l) and Sam Adams (r) recruiting new members at the annual English Welcome Reception.

INNOVATIONS IN TEACHING



Professor Joshua Calhoun talking with Becca Stevens and channeling Hamlet. Photos by undergraduate English major, Geordon Wollner.

An Office Hour with Professor Joshua Calhoun

The first thing you notice when you walk into the lecture hall is the mood. The shades are drawn. The main lights are dimmed. Students bring their conversations to a murmur as they settle in for one of Professor Calhoun's "Office Hours." Only the stage is brightly lit with two chairs separated by an end table adorned with a thick Shakespeare text, a quill pen, and a skull. Singer-songwriter Becca Stevens is welcomed to the stage with enthusiastic applause. For the next fifty minutes, the students of English 162 sit with rapt attention as Professor Calhoun engages Stevens with questions written by their peers. The first is from a student named Joe. He waves from the audience before Stevens answers. Her comments end with her cover of "Thinkin Bout You" while she strums along on the ukulele.

Professor Calhoun started the "Office Hour" tradition as a way to build stronger ties between the English Department and the American Players Theatre (APT) in Spring Green, WI. His first guest was Sarah Day, an accomplished actress who is in her 32nd season at APT. Following Day's visit, students were treated to conversations with musical artists Anais Mitchell and most recently Becca Stevens who shared perspectives on poetry and lyrics to complement the course's more traditional literary analysis.

Why call it "Office Hour"? Professor Calhoun wants to model for his students the "kinds of meandering

but meaningful conversations about art and life that made office hours so valuable for [him] when [he] was a student." He puts it:

The Shakespeare Intro course is filled with students from all over campus, and I think of it as a gateway course into the English Department. It's important to me that I challenge the future entrepreneurs and educators and politicians and engineers and actuarial scientists in my classroom to grapple with complexity, and I think a poem—Shakespearean or otherwise—is an ideal test site for figuring out how to play with patterns, to question ways of knowing, and to articulate ideas.

And what do the students think? Former student Geordon Wollner writes:

Visits from guests like Mitchell and Lauren Gunderson sent me into the spiraling revelation that this world we're in is connected through the art of storytelling—whether it's to teach Shakespeare, write plays, or live as creatively as you can. How can we take our experiences and, rather than filter them out, share them fully and engage in unexpected conversations that lead us to discover about ourselves what we never would've uncovered before?

Instructors in the English Department continue to incorporate new ways for their students to make connections in their classes. In the fall, we featured a story on the department's first fully online course taught by Brandee Easter. This semester, we are sharing two innovations by Professors Joshua Calhoun and Theresa Kelley.



Plates from Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden*.

Plants and Poetry with Professor Theresa Kelley

Moving from forging connections outside the university to bridging different fields at UW, Professor Kelley has been bringing together science fields and literary studies. In her “Life Forms” course, students read foundational natural history texts to learn how the scientists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thought about life, and they bring this knowledge into their readings of poetry and novels. Along the way, students peruse texts like Erasmus Darwin’s *The Botanic Garden* which weaves together scientific writing, poetic verse, and beautiful images. Eyes move back and forth between detailed footnotes describing plant reproduction and, at times, erotic couplets that do the same.

Professor Kelley describes the origin of the class as an attempt to bring students of science and the humanities together in order to better understand each other’s work and investments. Not only are students pushed to identify the scientific influences within the literature they

read, but they also begin to recognize how the creative thinking that literature promotes opens up new pathways for understanding science. And the course assignments reflect this blending of scientific and humanistic thinking. Students particularly excel at an essay prompt that asks them to imagine the evolution of a bizarre little creature called the tardigrade. Professor Kelley’s face lights up as she describes the imaginative responses she collected that braid the scientific work of the course with creative narratives featuring this microscopic “water bear” that can survive extreme temperatures, radiation, and pretty much anything nature can throw at it. She says that the “critical flexibility” she sees in her students’ writing for this course showcases the connections they have made across the apparent divide between the sciences and the humanities—a divide that may actually be nothing of the sort.

— Aaron Vieth

Scott Astrada, BA '06: Fighting Unjust Policy in Washington, DC



If undergrad memories are sorted by genre, one that stands out for **Scott Astrada (BA '06)** might be a comedy—at least everyone survived. Professor Jacques Lezra summoned Scott to his office about his paper on George Orwell, “Fight Club,” and violence. “I have no idea what you’re trying to say. And I don’t mean this as a compliment,” Lezra told Scott.

Prior to transferring to UW–Madison from FIU as an English major in 2003, Scott gravitated toward Michel Foucault and other poststructuralist thinkers. “I related to their critical assessment of the world around me, especially in regard to exposing injustices,” he explains. He also admired their elliptical writing style. As Scott and Professor Lezra attempted to decipher the paper, he saw how his intentions had gotten lost in mock-Foucauldian complexity.

Exposing injustices, Scott realized, would require clarity. “If you’re lucky to have someone listen to you, you have to be outward-focused and bridge-building, rather than list several multisyllabic words in a row,” he learned.

Now, as the Director for Federal Advocacy at the Center for Responsible Lending in Washington, DC, Scott’s work is all about building bridges, constructing narratives, and recognizing where systematic injustice appears. He conducts research and writes policy to create a more inclusive lending marketplace. Prior to this, Scott served as an Economic Policy Advisor in the US Senate under former minority leader Harry Reid, and as an attorney for the Obama administration from 2013-14. Scott talks about the sector of non-profit law and politics as a kind of clearinghouse where ideas are translated into policies that affect millions of people’s day-to-day lives—and where clarity of expression is absolutely crucial.

Although exposing injustice and making a positive difference in people’s lives was always his goal, Scott originally wanted to do these things as an academic. “I wanted to write the book that changed the world,” he laughs. The son of first-generation Americans, Scott’s parents urged him to pursue law or medicine. While his belief in the power of language prompted him to major in English, it was an internship with WisPirg that showed Scott how language could have a different kind of impact. After

graduating, he attended law and then business school at Marquette University, and entered the non-profit sector. Here, he realized that he could “make a contribution in fair lending and anti-discrimination laws—policies that create the world around us.”

POETRY AND POLICY

Scott’s background as an English major guides his approach to financial policy. “Poetry and policy are interconnected for me,” he says. “Literature shows how an individual relates to the world on a personal level; policy is how you create the community around you through law and regulation. If you have law and regulation with nothing personal, you create a power structure divorced from people’s lives that is, at worst, oppressive. If you have literature without policy, you have no way of influencing power structures beyond the personal level.”

To bridge the gap between the personal and the political, Scott creates policy from the ground up. This approach is analogous to the reading of literature, he explains. For one thing, literary voices reveal personal and subjective experiences that are not our own. He points to Dostoevsky’s psychological realism, which conveys the richness of an inner world that may not be written on a person’s face.

It is not just what we read, but *how* we read that matters to Scott. Reflective reading also exposes how our



Scott Astrada was an attorney for the Obama administration from 2013–14.

readerly judgments and expectations construct the world. He cites Hemingway's famously spare style for revealing how we tend to impose ideas on others: "When you're trying to figure out what somebody's thinking, you realize how much of your own values create someone else for you," he says.

Audre Lorde's subversive poetry exemplifies for Scott how poetry can reflect the harm of status quo thinking. Lorde's personal lyrics highlight the structural causes of the poet's marginalization as a queer black woman. "Those secret, personalized spaces are the result of systemic oppression and racism," he says. "By giving voice to those, you're disrupting the power structure that's created the world around you." In other words, poetry and policy are intimately linked. "Poetry is personal and self-reflective, but giving voice to something can be one of the most radical social statements that we can have. That's what drives social change, and that's what drives policy, on many levels."

By working for financial protection for lower income communities and people of color, recognizing and fighting against predatory financial practices, such as payday lending, and discriminatory auto lending and mortgage practices, Scott fights for the voices of people



As Director of Policy at the Center for Responsible Lending, Scott fights discriminatory lending practices in the financial marketplace.

who are excluded by discriminatory narratives and stereotypes. "Creating a fair financial marketplace allows people to share prosperity and really live the American dream," he says. Fighting for fair lending practices for more people, Scott helps create opportunities for new, previously unimagined life stories and voices to emerge.

— Lauren Hawley

Jonah Engel Bromwich, BA '11: Breaking News at *The New York Times*



Jonah Engel Bromwich, (BA 2011), is a general assignment reporter for the *New York Times* breaking news team. He covers a range of topics—from the December 2017 bombing attack in a subway tunnel near Times Square (none were killed), to

cultural phenomena like the memes and selfies sweeping our media landscape.

At UW, Jonah loved reading and discussing literature in his English classes. "I knew I wanted to be an English major," he says, "but I wasn't super career focused." With graduation looming, he joined the staff of the student newspaper and wrote for a music blog in his senior year—not knowing where these pursuits would eventually lead.

After graduating, Jonah worked at the Essen Haus as a bartender for nine months. He moved back to the East coast, where his parents reside, and got an internship doing PR for a firm in New York. When the internship

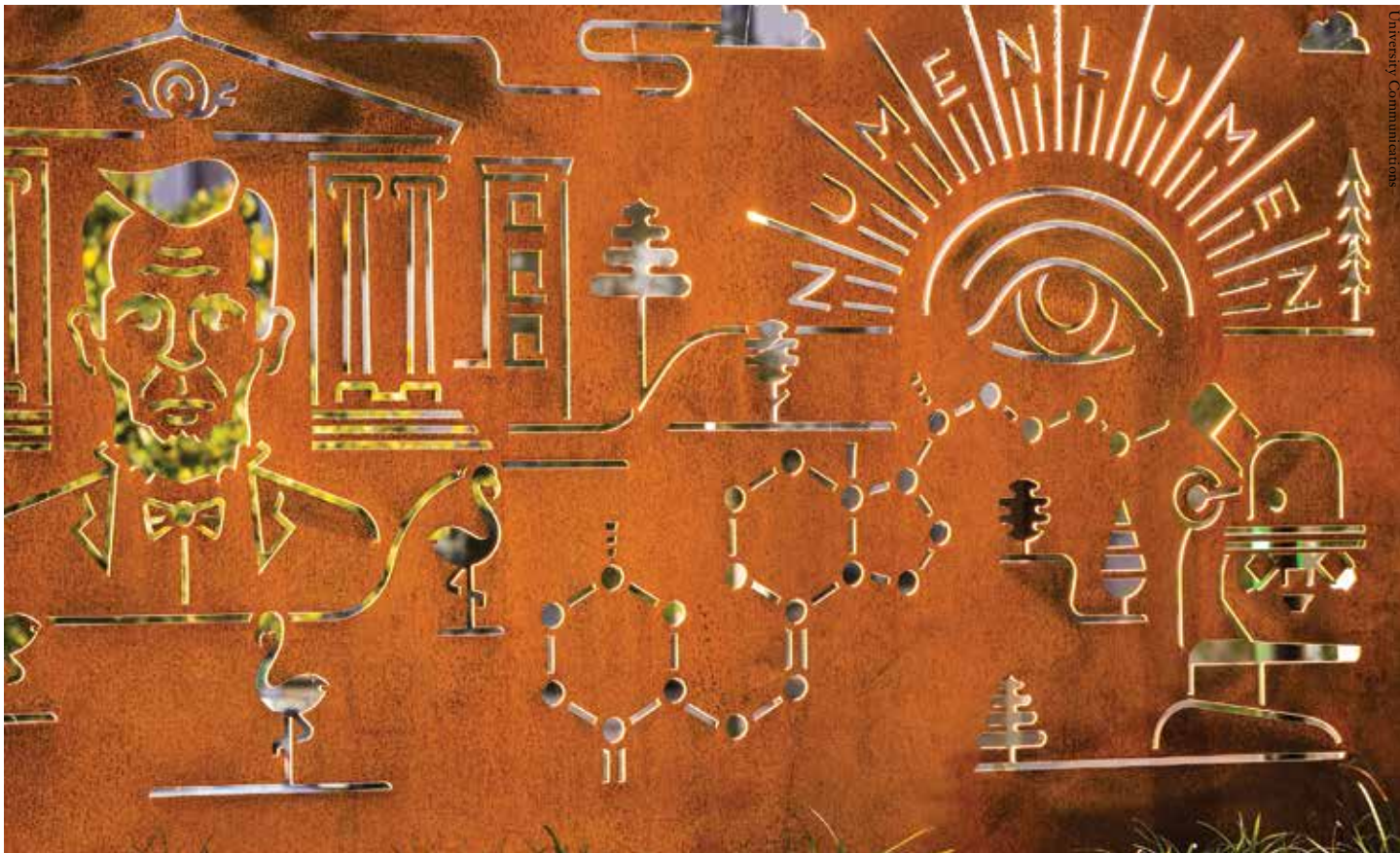
ended, the *New York Times* interviewed Jonah for an editorial assistantship. From there, he was hired as a temp to help cover the London 2012 Olympics—and the rest is history.

How does his background in English serve him as a reporter? Jonah says that "close reading is a far more important skill than people think. Paying attention to detail and thinking about meaning is helpful for what I do." He also nods to the strength of writing instruction in courses taught by UW English professors like David Zimmerman and Russ Castronovo.

But it was ultimately Jonah's openness to possibility that led him to breaking news. "I was open to anything," he says. "I didn't know what *wasn't* possible." Today he finds a sense of purpose in "living up to the responsibility that people expect out of the *Times*." Calling on his sense of adventure and writing talent that English at Wisconsin nurtured, Jonah's reporting captures the turbulence of our present moment.

— Lauren Hawley

NEWS IN GIVING AND AWARDS



University Communications

Recent Departmental Giving



Nina Auerbach

Before going on to an illustrious career as an English professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Nina Auerbach graduated as an English major from the University of Wisconsin in 1964. After a career filled with awards and publications—including work on Victorian literature, feminist criticism, theater history, and horror fiction

and film—Auerbach passed away early last year. She left a bequest of \$100,000 to UW that will be used in the English Department to support today's students along their own career paths. Nina will be missed and we wanted to recognize her wonderful legacy—a legacy that had its start right here at UW.

Readers might remember last semester's story about Angela Ramos who won the Dorothy Classen Urish

Scholarship. We are pleased to announce that with the continued generosity of Dorothy's son, Jack Urish, the scholarship award has been doubled for future winners. The English Undergraduate Scholarship, funded by Tom and Barb Johnson, has also been doubled. These awards help our department honor and reward our successful English majors and offer these students financial assistance as they move into the next stages of their careers.

We also have news that connects to last semester's story on First GEMS and this semester's piece on Melanin Speaking. After a stirring presentation to our Board of Visitors last year, these two groups inspired an immediate gift of \$500 from John Jankoff. Gifts like these continue to support students in their journey through the English major here at UW.



Dorothy Classen Urish

Distinguished Alumna 2018: Alicia Ostriker, '64



Alicia Ostriker

Poet. Scholar. Teacher. **Alicia Ostriker** has hit all these marks and more since earning her PhD in English from UW–Madison in 1964.

Alicia's first collection of poems, *Songs*, was published in 1969. Over the intervening decades, she has produced more than a dozen books of her poetry and works of criticism covering topics ranging from William Blake to the Bible, with *Feminist Revision and the Bible* (Blackwell, 1993). Her most recent collection of poems, *Waiting for the Light* (University of Pittsburgh Press), was published in 2017.

A Professor Emerita of English at Rutgers, Alicia is currently on the faculty at Drew University, teaching in its Low Residency Poetry MFA program.

Twice nominated for the National Book Award, Alicia has won the Jewish Book Award for Poetry and the William Carlos Williams Award of the Poetry Society of America, among her many accolades. Her fourth book of poetry, *The Mother-Child Papers* (1980), is considered a feminist classic. Robert Phillips writes in *The Hudson Review* that Ostriker is “one of our finest poets,” who “writes poems born of tragedy and illness...poems of sheer joy” that are “fresh, brave, unself-pitying.” The Jewish Women's Archive has characterized her as a “feminist revolutionary” whose contributions to literary criticism are “full of passionate daring and personal hutzpa.”

Speaking of her writing to *Contemporary Authors*, Alicia said: “Composing an essay, a review or a piece of literary criticism, I know more or less what I am doing and what I want to say. When I write a poem, I am crawling into the dark. Or else I am an aperture. Something needs to be put into language, and it chooses me. I invite such things.”

Alicia Ostriker received the 2018 Distinguished Alumni Award on her visit to UW–Madison in April. While on campus, Alicia conducted a Masters Class

for Creative Writing students, and read selections from her poetry at the annual English Department Majors award ceremony. The award was established by the English Board of Visitors to recognize alumni who have made exemplary use of their UW English education.

Let us now praise famous cities, our human fists
against heaven, let us praise
their devotion to wealth and power and art, goals
toward which we swim
ferociously upstream, tearing ourselves apart, to
lay our eggs and die

– from “The Glory of Cities,”
in *Waiting for the Light* (2017)

And I who read the story
will summon my mother, wherever she is
in the next world, perhaps in the paradise
she didn't believe
existed, she for whom honor
was not a concept, she from whom I learned
liberty and fury, our weapons in this world

– from “Afghanistan: The Raped Girl
in *Waiting for the Light* (2017)



University Communications

UPDATE ON GLOBAL BLACK STUDIES FUNDRAISING INITIATIVE

The College of Letters and Science has authorized three new faculty positions to form a center of research and teaching excellence in Global Black Literatures. This field includes African American literature, black British literature, and Caribbean and black diasporic literatures.

In spring 2018, eight faculty candidates from across the country visited UW to give job talks for our new positions, and job offers will be going out soon.

To date, the English Board of Visitors has raised 88% of the \$150,000 GBL supplemental faculty fellowship fund. English alumni (like you!) can help fill the remaining gap by making an annual contribution to the department. To help us meet our goal, contribute online through the University Foundation at www.supportuw.org/giving?seq=2597. To mail a contribution, please mail a check payable to *University of Wisconsin Foundation–Department of English* to:

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Do you have a recent work of fiction, non-fiction, or poetry that you would like to share with the English Department community? Tell us all about it at webadmin@english.wisc.edu and we will feature it on our alumni bookshelf.



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Professor Ron Harris and his students literally finding a balance between working out the mind and the body.

Making Waves

The English Department's Ron Harris has recently begun wedding his time in the classroom with time at a more aquatic location. While leading a roundtable seminar in the Bradley Learning Community that promotes the successful transition from high school to college life, Professor Harris meets with some of his students at the Natatorium each week for diving, relay races, and logrolling. He explains, "Students who stay physically active perform better in the classroom, but students sometimes think they're too busy for exercise. My goal is to get students back into the pool."

— Aaron Vieth