

FORUM

The Newsletter of the UH Department of English

Message from the Chair

Greetings of the season!

This fabulous issue of *Forum* that scrolls down before you congratulates student success—a year ‘round fact of life for the English De-



partment, but deserving special focus at this time of year when we reflect and celebrate. And after such a year! UH stayed safe, hopped online, and made a world of adjustments with flexibility and compassion. Even as we note our students’ successes, the English Department also humbly acknowledges the trying challenges they faced and the losses some bore, as we strive to support and mentor them in this difficult reality. The students you’ll meet here showcase the outstanding projects, performances, and plans among English majors and minors and Master’s- and PhD-level students. Faculty, too, feel honored when our students undertake independent research projects, earn recognition for their accomplishments, and win awards. But it’s not about us: here’s to our 2020 sampler of student success! Happy holidays. Be well.

—Ann Christensen

p.s. The department and *Forum* are committed to spreading the news about the activities, awards, and publications of the talented students of the UH Department of English. Please contact englnews@central.uh.edu and let us know about your very own student success stories!

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH CONGRATULATES

2020 LANNAN FOUNDATION FELLOW AND UH ALUMNA NOVUYO ROSA TSHUMA



The Department of English congratulates our alumna Novuyo Rosa Tshuma (Ph.D. in creative writing and literature), who has won the prestigious 2020 [Lannan Literary Fellowship](#) for Fiction.

Bestowed by the Lannan Foundation since 1989, the Lannan Literary Awards fellowships recognize writers whose work is of exceptional quality and who have made significant contributions to English-language literature. These fellowships are awarded to writers of distinctive literary merit who show potential for future outstanding work. Candidates are suggested anonymously “by a network of writers, literary scholars, publishers and editors,” with the foundation’s literary committee making the final determination.

Tshuma, who was born and grew up in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, is the author of the novel [House of Stone](#) (W.W. Norton), winner of the 2019 Edward Stanford Travel Writing Award for Fiction with a Sense of Place and the 2019 Bulawayo Arts Award for Outstanding Fiction. The novel was also listed for the 2019 Orwell Prize for Political Fiction, the 2019 Dylan Thomas Prize, the 2019 Rathbones Folio Prize and the 2020 Balcones Fiction Prize. Tshuma has been invited to give public lectures about *House of Stone* at Oxford University, Vassar College and the Nordic Africa Institute. In 2017, she received the Rockefeller Foundation’s prestigious Bellagio Center Literary Arts Residency Award.

Her collection *Shadows* was published by Kwela in South Africa to critical acclaim and won the 2014 Herman Charles Bosman Prize. A native of Zimbabwe who has lived in South Africa and the United States, she serves on the editorial advisory board and is an editor at the [Bare Life Review](#), a journal of refugee and immigrant literature based in San Francisco.

Tshuma is an assistant professor of fiction at Emerson College in Boston, Mass., where she serves on the Writing, Literature and Publishing Faculty. She has been recognized as one of the most promising writers from Africa under the age of 40.

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH CONGRATULATES

ROWAN 2020 COMPETITION WINNERS AND HONORABLE MENTIONS

The [Alexandra L. Rowan Memorial Foundation Writing Competition](#) is a writing competition funded by The Rowan Foundation and held during the summer in acknowledgment of the best fiction, non-fiction and poetry submissions from an undergraduate UH English student.



2020 Fiction Winner:

Truth Thomas-Alexander is a senior at the University of Houston and majors in Creative Writing and minors in Studio Art. Her concentration is fiction and she enjoys writing short stories. She plans on pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing after she completes her Bachelor's degree.

Read the Winning Fiction Entry, ["invalidation"](#) by Truth Thomas-Alexander.

Honorable Mentions in Fiction:

Josh Cornelius' "The Correction"

Zachary Eaton's "The Liar"

Piper Gourley's "Are You Dreaming, Billie?"



2020 Poetry Winner:

Matthew Flores is a senior at UH and originally from south Texas. He works as a delivery driver and also assists with humanitarian aid for migrants at the South Texas Human Rights Center in Falfurrias, Texas. He plans to attend an MFA or interdisciplinary PhD program next year in the fall.

Read the winning entry ["Reading Paz at the Cemetery"](#) by Matthew Flores.

Honorable Mentions in Poetry:

Claire Guzik's "Stones"

Alyssa Holt's "God and Mammoths"

Kristin Powell's "Spinach"

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH CONGRATULATES

ROWAN 2020 COMPETITION WINNERS AND HONORABLE MENTIONS



2020 Non-fiction Winner:

Zachary Eaton is an English-Creative Writing student at the University of Houston who hopes to graduate (at last) in summer 2021. He writes fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. He co-wrote the screenplay “Cardinal” with writer/director James Frank. He enjoys watching sports, procrastinating, and rereading the same short story collections over and over again. He’s worked at Dominos Pizza, Target, Barnes and Noble, as a server, and as a cashier. He knows you shouldn’t start all your sentences with the same pronoun, but feels the 100-word bio format doesn’t leave room for much else. He recommends “The Student” by Anton Chekhov.

Read the Winning Entry [“The Opera Singer”](#) by Zachary Eaton.

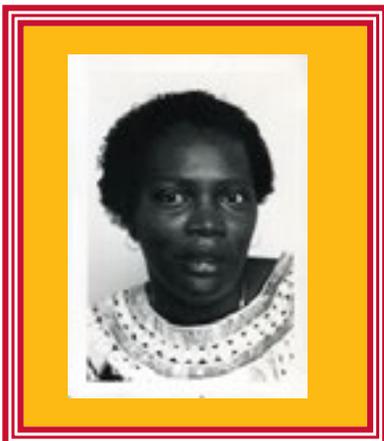
Honorable Mentions in Non-fiction:

Alicia Alcantara’s “The Man Downstairs”

Claire Guzik’s “Tragic Nothingness”

Naveera Majid’s “Magical Realism and Contradiction in The Hummingbird’s Daughter”

The English Department Common Read: Pat Parker



The first UH English Department Common Read event celebrated local author Pat Parker (1944-1989). Parker was born and raised in Houston’s Third Ward, she published five books of poetry, prose works and plays; she was also an activist for civil rights, women’s rights, and LGBTQ rights. The inaugural event was organized by the department chair Dr. Ann Christensen and undergraduate English major Veronica Ordoñez.

From their respective homes, scholars, students and friends of the English Department met virtually on

Zoom to read a selection of poems from [The Complete Works of Pat Parker](#) aloud and discussed them on October 20th. The poem “Movement in Black” was performed by MFA poetry student Aris Kian and the poem “Womenslaughter” was performed by Ph.D poetry student Joy Priest and Dr. Elizabeth Gregory from Women and Gender Studies. Archival videos were also shared of Parker’s performances

The English Department Common Read: Pat Parker (cont'd)

of her own poetry. Professor Francine J. Harris discussed how Parker's poetry is "interested in foregrounding the writer as the speaker, and as such, is in line with the Black Arts movement and its fellow members June Jordan and Audre Lorde." Later in the discussion, Ph.D. student Ashley Warner pointed out that she appreciated that Parker's poetry celebrates that "Black women writers have always concerned themselves with the communal". The event combined the performance of Pat Parker's work with a lively literary conversation.

Forum spoke to senior undergraduate student Veronica Ordoñez about her experience co-leading the Common Read. She explained that one goal was to invite the whole department to come together in this socially distant moment. After Pat Parker was selected as the inaugural author, Ordoñez explained her curation process, "I read through her book and took notes on the poems that stood out to me and why. Many of my notes related to the pieces that were most relevant to the conversation right now, dealing with racial justice, police brutality as well as LGBTQ rights."

It was important for Ordoñez that the poems be performed because "It makes the texts come alive, and it's better than having everyone in the virtual space scrolling." Initially, she was anticipating asking for volunteers to read the poems aloud. But as she was selecting the poems she realized that "this work needs to be practiced before it can be voiced and it shouldn't be entrusted lightly. Also, I am Latina and Dr. Christensen is white. We both felt that some of these poems were not ours to read and we needed to reach out to Black writers, scholars and artists."

While the Common Read followed a thoughtfully crafted agenda co-leader Ordoñez' favorite moment of the event was when Dr. Roberto Tejada asked to read a poem that was not on the agenda. "I was like this is what we want! Start a conversation within a structure but then let things fly. I thought the spontaneity of it and how the back and forth started was just beautiful."

Ordoñez, a 2020 [Mellon Scholar](#) who is currently working on her senior Honors Thesis, felt that doing undergraduate research prepared her for co-curating a literary event. "If I hadn't had experience corresponding with professors for my research, I might not have had the confidence. And yet, working on this project with Dr. Christensen also gave me confidence and allowed me to step into my literary self. It felt like the test of everything I've been learning."

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Spotlight: Faculty-Mentored Undergraduate Research



Maya Garza is a [2020 Mellon Scholar](#) whose project, “Giants, Incubi, and Monstrous Sisters: Ethnocentrism and Sexism in the British Legends of Albion” was mentored by Dr. Lorraine Stock. Garza is also writing a senior Honors Thesis under Stock’s direction on this Anglo-Norman myth from the fourteenth century that was inspired by Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of The Kings of Britain*. Garza and Stock spoke to *Forum* about the project.

Garza explained that as a dual major, it was her interest in classics that led her to medieval literature. “I took the Chaucer class with Dr. Stock and I loved the material, so I decided to shoot for it and talk to her about sponsoring me for the Mellon.”

She describes Geoffrey of Monmouth’s text as masculinist, depicting Brutus of Troy conquering giants who were characterized as savages. For Garza and Stock, the *Legends of Albion* could be considered the “feminist” version of these foundation myths. According to the legend, the giants were the progeny of Greek princesses who were supposed to be married off to princes, but rejected their matches and killed the princes, were then cast off, and discovered an island they named after the princess Albina. The princesses procreated with devils there and hence, the giants. For Garza, “This feminist narrative complicates the origin myth by Monmouth, in terms of the princesses’ nationality, being Greek, but they’re also Othered because they are women who insist on their sovereignty. I was excited by the possibility of looking at these stories through a post-colonial and feminist lens. Specifically, I was looking at how they were creating ethnocentric and misogynistic portrayals of certain character groups.” Stock added that she felt the *Legends of Albion* was an ideal subject for undergraduate research because while versions of the story changed over time and could be studied with a number of critical approaches, the narrative itself was contained.

Garza spoke about how she decided to apply to be a Mellon Scholar and to write the [Senior Honors Thesis](#). She explained, “My family is very supportive of me but they don’t know exactly what I do in terms of my research. Nonetheless, I’ve had to figure out how to become a compelling candidate for graduate school. Undergraduate research is part of that.” Stock noted that she and Garza had similar undergraduate experiences in that they were both the first people in their families to attend college: “My family didn’t understand what I was studying either! I’m comfortable at UH because I identify with many of our students.”

For Stock, Garza is one of those students who becomes very engaged in their undergraduate research (whether it be a Mellon, P.U.R.S or S.U.R.F) and the project ends up becoming the foundation for Honors Thesis research. A Ph.D. in English Literature is Garza’s eventual goal but she isn’t sure if she’d like to focus on the Renaissance or Medieval period. Stock assures Garza that her background in Classics and her current Medieval research are foundational for Renaissance studies. “Don’t worry,” Stock said. “If you decide to go with Renaissance, I won’t hate you. I’ll support you.” There is, obviously, no doubt about that.

Have News?

We’d love to hear from you.

Please reach out to us at: englnews@central.uh.edu

Spotlight: Faculty-Mentored Undergraduate Research



Senior undergraduate English major Matt Flores told *Forum* that in writing his senior Honors Thesis he began to think of his poetry project from an activist perspective. “I’ve been working with The South Texas Human Rights Center in Falfurrias, who help get loved ones in contact with local authorities and volunteer forensics teams when migrant remains are recovered, along with erecting water stations on the country roads. I’ve gone down a handful of times to work with them and it shifted my poetic as well as critical writing in a direction that felt more ethically and activist centered.”

Flores was also a [2019 Mellon Scholar](#). As his sponsor Dr. Roberto Tejada worked with Flores on an annotated bibliography of international modern and contemporary poetry books for that project, he was drawn to the works of poets that prioritized an ethical praxis in their work. This work fed into the Senior Honors Thesis. Flores also worked with the [FrameWorks Program](#), which provides students with peer and faculty mentorship as they conceive, research, write, present, and ultimately publish critical essays that draw on the interdisciplinary humanities. His work placed the poems he was writing in conversation with two contemporary artists [Teresa Margolles](#) and [Ángel Lartigue](#) and the “activism they were engaging with that brings awareness to a lot of trauma related to the border, whether it’s femicides or migrant deaths. I was able to spend a lot of time bringing in different theoretical forms which show up in some of the poems.”

Flores was interested in the atemporality of grief as it is represented in the writings of Walter Benjamin, whose introduction to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* Flores puts in dialogue with Texas *conjunto* music (which has a strong Czech and German influence and features accordions as well as mariachi guitars). He finds both to be representative of a certain tenor of melancholy that is expressed in lyric fragmentation. Queer Theorist José Esteban Muñoz’ posthumous book *The Sense of Brown* was also influential “in terms of looking at brownness in a philosophical way... imagining the potential for Brown and Black bodies to have purpose in the after life through forms of celebration, and through art as a means of remembering.” Flores’ essay, “It is Melody in Shape: South Texas, Ángel Lartigue, and the Art of Dwelling”, will be published in the forthcoming issue of the *FrameWorks Journal*. At this point, Flores’ scholarly, poetic, and activist practices are deeply entwined.

He credits the [Mellon Graduate Boot camp](#) for encouraging him to apply to graduate school. When asked about the successful defense of his Honors Thesis he says, “It was great. I felt like I did the work and my mentors were with me all along, not putting too much pressure but helping me build it as I went.” His thesis supervisor Dr. Tejada said, “Matt has a very expansive curiosity. I could give him one or two citations and from those he’d come back with three or four other readings he’d like to talk about. In this proliferating way his research became an open site. A place where you bring ideas from different disciplines that do not need to be bound by the false solace of categories.” Dr. Amanda Ellis, who served on Matt’s Honors Thesis committee said she enjoyed many walks with Flores around campus where they discussed wide ranging topics including critical theory, life, and the ethical stakes of his research. Dr. Hayan Charara who also served on Flores’ Honors Thesis committee described him as a gifted writer as well as “the kind of student every teacher hopes for—someone who is enthusiastic and committed to learning.”

Spotlight: Faculty-Mentored Undergraduate Research



Senior English major Rana Mohamad's 2020 [Mellon Research Scholar](#) Project "Black, Arab, Other: The Sudanese Migrant Woman's Articulation of Identity" sought to question representations of the Afro-Arab, processes of identity formation and discourses of power. The undergraduate coursework that inspired her to undertake this project included Dr. Kavita Singh's Caribbean Literature class, which she credits as the first experience studying literature as a means "to access the concept of a national identity...It was the first time we were discussing literary expression and representation as part of the post-colonial moment, or as part of history. I am from Sudan, so I started asking myself what is the literature that I can read that will give me access to the way Sudanese people

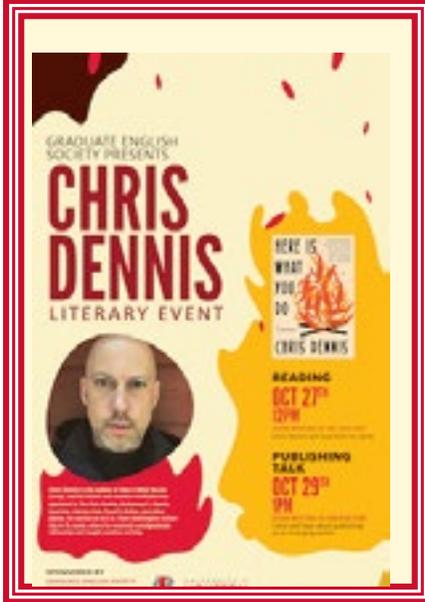
understand themselves." Mohamad was also a student in Dr. Daniel Centeno's World Cultures and Literatures class and this survey course clarified the difference between studying a culture and literature as an insider, as Caribbeanist scholar Singh modeled, and studying it as an outsider. This facilitated Mohamad's ability to position her research within the discipline, and also to appreciate "what my project would achieve for someone who had no idea what it meant to be from Sudan."

In selecting a mentor for her project, Mohamad sought out faculty who were knowledgeable about Arabic Literature. "Sudan is a nation that is both Black and Arab, so I wanted to work with someone who would be able to talk about the kind of hierarchy that exists in the Arab world and then how that makes itself apparent in Sudanese literature or the Sudanese concepts of identity. The Mellon program helped me with that and I eventually selected Dr. Aboul-Ela." Mohamad also stressed that her question came into focus through the research process, in discussion with Aboul-Ela about the texts on her reading list, which were necessary to help her contextualize her own work. She described *Orientalism* by Edward Said as essential to her understanding of how her questions as a researcher relate to the western gaze. "Dr. Aboul-Ela thought migration might be an important factor because identity is disrupted by migration. And it was. As a Sudanese woman growing up in America, it's natural for me to look at the Sudanese experience and ask why Blackness is not at the forefront of the discourse. Whereas for a Sudanese person growing up in Sudan, race may not be that much of a factor, maybe religion is more of a factor."

As her mentor, Mohamad appreciated how Aboul-Ela encouraged her to consider research as a space of intersection. Likewise, Aboul-Ela told *Forum*: "There was a special urgency about working with a student on this particular project last summer, when everyone's attention was turned to racial justice and histories of oppression. Rana's perspective made these issues more complicated, and her way of putting her personal narrative in dialogue with her research was uniquely satisfying."

As a student in the Honors College [FrameWorks Program](#), Mohamad is currently preparing an essay *Shadow Bodies: The Articulation of Self* that engages her interest in Sudanese migrant women, specifically how they express themselves within discourses of blackness and/or religion in the West. But for this project involves her creative practice, she is translating her mother's poems from Arabic and responding to them. "It's an exploration of the language and the ways I might assume things about my mom, and what that means in a larger sense because I'm so influenced by western culture. This next step of the project is a lot more personal." In the future, Mohamad hopes to pursue a Ph.D. in African and Diaspora studies.

The Graduate English Society Presents: A Reading and Publishing Talk with Chris Dennis



The Graduate English Society ([G.E.S.](#)) welcomed Chris Dennis the author of [Here is What You Do](#) (2019) for a virtual reading on October 27th and a publishing talk on October 29th. These events were sponsored by UH's Activities Funding Board and were organized by Maurine Ogbaa (Ph.D. candidate, Literature), chair of G.E.S events and professionalism committee Katie Edkins Milligan (MFA student, CWP) and the Officers of G.E.S (Sylvia Garcia (Ph.D. student, Literature), Ann Kroger (Ph.D. student, RCP), and Grace Wagner (MFA student, CWP)).

The moderator for both events was English Literature Ph.D. candidate Maurine Ogbaa who has been friends with Chris Dennis since they attended the same MFA program. Dennis is an LGBTQ writer whose first collection deals with rural life, fatherhood, trauma, and incarceration, things the

author is candid about his struggles with in conversation. *Kirkus Review* praised it as a “debut collection that delves into the humanity and pain of highly flawed characters.” Dennis read the title story about an addicted young school teacher who is arrested and imprisoned. Afterwards, he discussed his interest in “what our desires say about the story of our lives.” The collection also features a story, “In Motel Rooms”, told from the point of view of Coretta Scott King while she was under FBI surveillance. Dennis was asked about cultural appropriation and his thoughts on the #Own Voices Movement. He said that he thought it should be suspect when a white man wants to write from the perspective of a Black woman. But he also felt that, “If white men aren’t wondering what it’s like to be a Black woman in the world are they really thinking hard enough?”

The publishing talk began with Dennis reading his essay, published in *The Paris Review*, [“El Dorado, Illinois”](#) about his hometown and the opioid crisis there—a problem with which he has personal experience. When he was asked about the difference between writing fiction and nonfiction, he spoke about how everyone in the area started to share the story. “It was moving. People would ask me if I was OK. I felt that the relatively conservative people in this town wanted something better for me and others struggling with addiction who they might not have necessarily empathized with before.”

As someone whose work has appeared in illustrious publications such as *Granta* and *McSweeney’s* he spoke to the process of getting your work out there and finding an agent. He also spoke about the difficulty of sustaining a writing life in the years that pass between finishing your first manuscript and seeing it published. Both Chris Dennis and Maurine Ogbaa shared that their work has influenced each other and stressed the importance of mutually supportive creative relationships. As a number of instructors in the English Department had assigned stories from the collection in their undergraduate classes, both events were very well attended by graduate and undergraduate students alike.