

# FORUM

## The Newsletter of the UH Department of English

### Message from the Chair

We changed our plans all year—how we worked and taught, how and even where we lived. Archives were closed and human subjects inaccessible. Academic conferences were cancelled or moved on-line; so, we washed dishes during plenaries and took phone calls instead of lunchbreaks. (I went headphoned to walk my dog and listen to



lectures simultaneously; zoomed faculty meetings before a faked pristine backdrop to mask domestic chaos behind; typed email messages here and there; I would type them anywhere—in a box and with a fox, on a train and in the rain). Some of us had weeks and months with children at home to teach, entertain, and feed; others cared for and worried about extended families all over the globe. Some lost loved ones. We changed our plans and our lives.

But even in these covid-icissitudes, some traditions endured. For example, we welcomed cohorts of new students, four new faculty members, and two new babies. In December and May, as usual, we conferred BAs, MAs, MFAs, and PhDs. There were staff changes, promotions, and a retirement (Dr. Lawrence Hogue). Among the inveterate annual rites is the season of writing letters of recommendation, or LORS. Our students apply for fellowships, graduate programs, internships, and jobs, and our colleagues go up for awards, promotions, and tenure. These occasions invite us recommenders to revisit applicants' performance, relive experiences with them, and relish their success as we advocate for their "place at the table." These "tables" for students include graduate programs in Library Science, Law, Literature and Writing, and Education; administrative positions with non-profit organizations; and teaching and research positions in high schools, community colleges, liberal arts, and research universities, among others. We send off these gifted and hard-working people with our best remarks and our best regards. I send the very same to you, dear readers. Thank you for being a part of our larger project. May our connection to you renew and endure even though our plans change.

-Ann Christensen

# THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH CONGRATULATES

DR. ROBERTO TEJADA WINNER OF A 2021 GUGGENHEIM FELLOWSHIP

Roberto Tejada, Hugh Roy and Lillie Cranz Cullen Distinguished Professor in the Department of English, is the recipient of a 2021 Guggenheim Fellowship for his most recent collection of poems, started in the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown.

The Guggenheim Fellowship is awarded annually through a rigorous peer-review process. He was selected from almost 3,000 applicants. The fellowship is intended “for individuals who have already demonstrated exceptional capacity for productive scholarship or exceptional creative ability in the arts”. Dr. Tejada is one of 184 artists, writers, scholars and scientists who received the honor this year.



“I see this as a validation of my work prior to this moment and an encouragement toward work that will come in the future,” he said.

A translator, editor, essayist, art historian, and cultural critic; Tejada’s writing addresses the political imagination and impurity of time in shared image environments; configurations of art, life, and language inclined to the future.

His multifaceted creative practice and critical inquiry have been recognized with numerous fellowships and grants including awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Fulbright Foundation, Creative Capital Warhol Foundation, Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado (São Paulo, Brazil), as well as The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute and the Oakley Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Williams College.

If it is safe to travel this summer, Tejada plans to travel to two of his favorite cities to finish his new collection, “Carbonate of Copper.” One is Mexico City, where Tejada wrote his first book of poems, “Mirrors for Gold,” and worked as a magazine editor of *Vuelta*, with the late Nobel laureate Octavio Paz. The other is Marfa, in West Texas. The 50,000\$ fellowship will enable these travels to places from which he draws inspiration.

The poems from Tejada’s collection-in-progress are intimately tied to the pandemic and our collective reckoning with “the kind of grief that we haven’t been able to express at the global level of humanity to the number of lives that have been lost in the last year.”

## THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH CONGRATULATES

### WINNERS OF THE 2021 GRADUATE STUDENT AWARDS

Two new Graduate Student Awards have been established in 2021. The Dissertation Completion Award is made possible by Dr. Lois Zamora's generous endowment. The winner of the \$5,000 award in 2021 is Carolann Madden (Ph.D., CWP). The new David Judkins Ph.D. Dissertation Progress Grant to advance Anti-Racist Projects was funded through a generous donation by Emeritus Professor David Judkins. This year's winner of the \$2,000 award is Maurine Ogbaa (Ph.D., Lit).

The Wyman H. Herendeen Award for Excellence in Scholarly Publication, endowed by Emeritus Professor Dorothy Baker, was awarded again this year. The winners of the \$1,000 award are Antony Box (Ph.D., RCP) and Evan Horne (M.A.).

The selection committees found that all of the projects submitted "were distinguished and fascinating." Congratulations to our winners!



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## THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH CONGRATULATES

### RENA BRADLEY WINNER OF THE 2021 UH TEACHING EXCELLENCE AWARD

PH.D Candidate (RCP) Rena Bradley has won a university wide Teaching Excellence Award, one of only three Graduate Teaching Assistants to receive this honour at UH, which was announced by the Provost, Paula Myrick Short, on May 7th 2021.

This award to acknowledges Bradley's excellence in her instruction of lower division students of the Department of English. She is an inspiration to her students and an able mentor and advisor. Congratulations, Rena!



# Spotlight: Faculty Discuss Online Teaching In a Pandemic



Dr. Lauren Zentz had extensive experience teaching online before the COVID 19 Pandemic. She taught upper division courses that both graduates and advanced undergraduates enrolled in asynchronously titled “Bakhtin and the Internet” and “Socializing the Nation in the Internet Age”, that enrolled both graduate and advanced undergraduates. *Forum* spoke to Dr. Zentz to gain some insights into how pedagogy has had to shift to meet our moment.

*Forum:* How do your previous experiences compare to the experience of teaching online in a socially distanced time?

Dr. Zentz: When I started teaching online before the pandemic, I discovered that I was filling a major need, classes that would only be half full when I offered them in a face-

to-face format were completely overflowing when I offered them online. This is because at UH we have so many working students and students with young families. It was very convenient for them to not have to commute to campus.

The chaos that the pandemic has wrought on all our students has been astounding. I’ve had to make accommodations for reasons such as losing family members to COVID, losing family members to other illnesses, the mental health toll of COVID and of isolation, as well as students who have simply fallen behind. I always try to be flexible as an instructor while demanding that students take responsibility for their learning, but this has been “next level.” I’ve had to be very flexible.

*Forum:* In your experience, are learning platforms such as Blackboard and Teams equally accessible to students? And how do you support your students’ user experience on these platforms?

Dr. Zentz: In terms of online instruction’s accessibility from a learning ability standpoint, I had an interesting discovery before the pandemic when a student who was on the autism spectrum and had difficulty reading social cues took my class and found they blossomed in our online asynchronous class because they felt they could express themselves in ways they weren’t able to in a face-to-face class. They could open up. That was encouraging for me, and should encourage all of us to maintain online learning as an element of our teaching repertoires.

In terms of material accessibility and internet accessibility, unfortunately this is pretty uneven. Students living on campus with UH Wi-Fi have no problems, but for students who don’t have consistent access to a computer and need to access Microsoft Teams on their phone, they struggle.

There’s also the question of the technological learning curve. Many instructors assume

## Spotlight: Faculty Discuss Online Teaching In a Pandemic (Cont'd)

that Gen Z students, being digitally native, will have no problem using the online learning platform. We as teachers need to remember to be very explicit with students about where to find things and how to post to discussion boards and submit assignments.

*Forum:* Many students and teachers lament the loss or perceived loss of the interpersonal dimension of online learning; do you have any advice for those new to online learning on how to be themselves, or how to bring a personal touch?

Dr. Zentz: The Streams on the Microsoft Teams have made this a lot easier to me because it's very integrated into the platform- you just record it and in 5 minutes you can send it. When I was first trying to do lectures online, I was using a website called Screencast-O-Matic—before we had access to software like Teams and Zoom. It allowed me to record a free video, and I found that because it was being recorded, I always wanted it to be the most perfect lecture of all time. I found that I kept restarting because I didn't have access to editing software. But now that we do, no one has hours to spend editing videos! At some point I decided, I'm going to speak freely and let myself stutter, hesitate, and scratch my nose. I take the risk of rambling but it's also less formal and more like a real conversation. I also try to write in a semi-formal way that is both academically rigorous but also personable in order to encourage students to feel comfortable being themselves in the discussion boards - to both express themselves but also provide thoughtful commentaries about our course materials.

*Forum:* What are some of the things that you appreciate about online instruction that can't be recreated in a face-to-face class? Is there anything from these classes you might try to carry forward into the physical classroom?

Dr. Zentz: I'd already adopted some strategies from my online class in the face-to-face mode before the pandemic. One of those things was asking my seminar students to post discussion questions on Blackboard by the morning of the in-person class session as a starting point for our conversation. That way we don't have to start from my thoughts or from scratch.

Another thing that online learning got me to do, that we probably all should have been doing anyway, was to have my assignments require students to use and improve their own digital literacies. I occasionally have them do a podcast assignment or a video lecture, instead of a paper, and that forces them to create an audio recording and upload an mp3 or make a video on Stream in Microsoft Teams or on Zoom. It also encourages students to perform in other academic ways. They don't just learn to write a paper, but they also learn how to give a concise talk or presentation. These assignments also give my eyes a much-needed break from reading. I think I'll continue to give my students multimodal assignments: video presentations, audio presentations, etc. I think these technical literacies are also important to our students in this era.

# Spotlight: Faculty Discuss Online Teaching In a Pandemic



This semester, four of Dr. Laura Turchi's English in Secondary Schools students had their profiles of poets published by NCTE as part of its National Poetry Month initiative. Each poet profile argued for the presence of these poets in the secondary classroom and offered discussion points, activities, and teaching strategies. Forum spoke with Dr. Turchi about her experience teaching online in the COVID 19 pandemic.

*Forum:* Has there been a difference between your experience teaching online before the pandemic and your experience now?

*Dr. Turchi:* Yes. But it's less that my instruction has changed: the biggest change has been to the situation of the students. It's one thing to be teaching an online course and know that your students are in a range of online and face to face courses they've chosen for themselves. But suddenly students were taking every course online. Things that used to be entertaining and quirky as class assignments, like experimenting with different online tools and platforms became just a headache for students. They don't want to navigate to a number of different platforms. There is a difference in the bandwidth of the students and in myself as well: we all lost some tolerance for exploring and figuring out new tools.

Even under ideal circumstances transitioning to fully online learning is a challenge for any student. And most of us are not living under ideal circumstances. I've had many students caring for sick family members, for their own children, or for the children of family members. I don't want my class to make my students' lives more difficult.

*Forum:* How did you come up with the idea for the NCTE project assignment for digital publication? Was it inspired by our distanced moment?

*Dr. Turchi:* The fact that we were all living online helped me come up with the assignment. NCTE started this Poet of the Day newsletter for National Poetry Month last year. Throughout the month of April NCTE sends out a profile per day and then at the end of the month they create an interactive calendar with all the poets' faces. I was enchanted by that. The profiles are very straightforward: write a short bio of the poet, choose a poem and argue why it should be taught, provide some suggestions about how to teach this poet, and then offer a short personal biographical note. For my students this meant describing themselves as future teachers or their aspirations to go to graduate school or have other adventures.

As a first class assignment, this was great as it allowed me to learn about my students: who they are, what they do, and what they're passionate about. Many of my students chose poets I hadn't heard of or whose works I hadn't seen taught, and so I encouraged them to submit their assignments to NCTE. To date, four of my students' Poet of the Day profiles have been published. It's very fun to see these pop up! NCTE as an English teaching organization wants



## Spotlight: Faculty Discuss Online Teaching In a Pandemic (Cont'd)

to bring in new voices. They don't need expert poetry teachers. They need people thinking about what can be taught or why or how. So it's low-stakes, in terms of not requiring expertise. I was amazed that my students had such a sense of the world of poetry. I was also pleased by the way the assignment connected students to one another and allowed them to take inspiration from each other. Students who saw their classmates in print wished they'd submitted too!

*Forum:* How do you anticipate or react to the isolation of the online learning environment?

Dr. Turchi: When you're a college instructor and have autonomy over your time, virtual meetings can feel preferable to a face-to-face meeting, because they're more efficient and allow you to work with people at a distance. This year, I've been working on Shakespeare and social justice-centered curriculum with New York's Public Theatre and the Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles, and I haven't left Houston.

But the positive way I feel about this technology is related to my autonomy over my time. I'd like give my students a similarly positive experience of online collaboration. Instead I sometimes get enormous pushback when I assign group work (especially during covid), and for that reason I have cut back on my expectations. I wish I could figure out a way to allow students to experience their peers' work as valuable to them. Too often students can feel like they're getting burned on group projects—being put in the position of doing most of the work. That's very isolating. I want students to experience pleasure in communal learning and it makes me sad if they find their group work uninspiring. So I have experimented with different kinds of assignments, and I hope that over time strategies for online collaboration improve. For now, group work is more successful in the face-to-face classroom where distractions are less pervasive. This is the most important way isolation has impacted my classroom in terms of pedagogy.

*Forum:* Do you have any advice on how instructors can be themselves online and give their classes a personal touch?

Dr. Turchi: Only cheesy ones! I have a collection of mugs from travels all over. I will tell the story of the mug I'm drinking tea from as I start the class. I have to get over the fact that my lectures are recorded and someone watching it later might wonder: what on earth is she talking about? But they can always fast forward.

I also ask students to volunteer to share their assignment drafts. This allows me to virtually review their drafts, modelling revision strategies, for the benefit of the whole class. That way students can hear me thinking out loud and making helpful (I hope) suggestions. It's important for the students to see their instructor as more than just a set of directives. That's the worst-case scenario.

So that's all I got, some cheesy jokes. I do remind students they get extra credit if they laugh (both laugh).

## Spotlight: Teaching Fellows on Going Online in their Own Words

Brittney Ray Crowell is a third year Ph.D student in the English and Creative Writer Program studying poetry. She has taught at the secondary level for thirteen years.

*Forum:* What was the first class you were teaching that went online and what was the delivery format?

Brittney: I was a TA in Kevin Prufer and Erin Beaulieu's ENGL 2318 Introduction to Creative Writing during the Spring Semester when we went into lockdown, but I was also teaching a creative writing class at a middle school. We used Google Classroom at the Middle School, which was really user friendly. For the Introduction to Creative Writing class, the instructors of record Professors Prufer and Belieu had access to the class' Blackboard shell, and Obi Umeozor the other TA and me, who normally met with the students twice a week for workshop sessions, did not. So, we polled the students and asked them which platforms they were comfortable with, and they said Zoom. We met synchronously on Zoom and created a Drive file with weekly folders where student could share workshop submissions. It worked out well.

It was a lot to try to learn all these different platforms in a short amount of time having never taught online before. Which is why we asked the ENGL 2318 students what they were most comfortable with when we initially moved online. I don't believe in forcing my students to adopt a technology if I can't be a resource for them in troubleshooting when something doesn't work.

*Forum:* What has teaching synchronously been like?

Brittney: I like it. You can't mimic an in-person classroom through the screen, but you do get a sense of who your students are. I didn't enforce webcam use at all times, especially in the beginning of the pandemic, because I didn't have a sense of what exactly was going on in the students' lives and wanted to err on the side of compassion.

We used the breakout rooms so it wouldn't just be me lecturing or me providing feedback. These small groups had some dedicated class time on a weekly basis. From what I saw these groups really became a community, they trusted each other's judgement and learned each other's work. That was really fun, facilitating that type of supportive community even though it was virtual. I didn't pop into their sessions excessively because I didn't want them to feel it was a gotcha game. When I did, they were doing what they were supposed to.

You have to be open about the fact you're also adjusting also: they might hear my dog in the background, or they might see my kid walk into the room. Granting them some grace is important and so is taking the time to check-in, asking them how they're doing. It's the same approach that allows you to be relatable in the in-person classroom but you have to adjust it to the virtual format.





## Spotlight: Teaching Fellows on Going Online in their Own Words

Ann Kroger is a second year Ph.D. student in the English Rhetoric and Composition Program at the University of Houston. She is an experienced in-person composition instructor who reflected on her pandemic teaching experience online for this special COVID 19 feature of *Forum*.

I remember the first online class I ever took as a student. It was Dr. John McNamara's British Literature ENGL 3327 in the Fall of 2009. One would click into the early days of YouTube and there, amid a variety of UH courses, was Dr. McNamara's entire semester: twenty-eight video lectures, each an hour and twenty minutes long.

I've thought a lot about his class this year; Dr. McNamara in his button downs and blazers reading from his

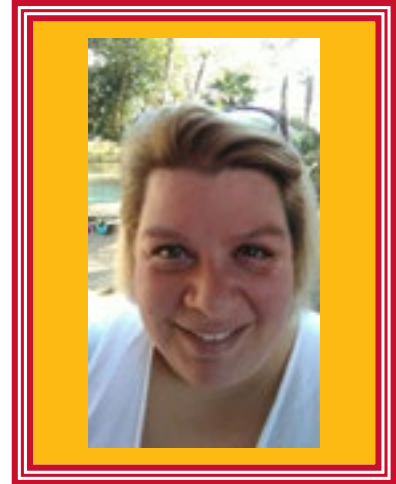
worn *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Looking back, it was kind of beautiful in its simplicity. McNamara sat on one side of a desk lecturing, and twenty miles away, I sat on the other side of my desk listening to him.

But then I remember, I chose that class. I chose what must seem by today's standards a completely passive way of listening as learning, and it worked for me. That was the real quandary of my online pedagogy this year. How do I teach ENGL 1303 online to a class where the preponderance of students never would have chosen online instruction? How do I approach online learning to encompass the different styles of learning: visual, aural, verbal, physical, logical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal?

My answer is, simply, that I don't know if I ever came to a great answer. I tried. I tried coming at learning from a variety of avenues, hoping that if one method didn't stick, maybe another would. I posted announcements and integrated videos, but I just as often recommended my students brainstorm by going on a walk or taking a drive into the country. I integrated music into my classes, less as a theme and more as an escape, using Metallica's "Enter Sandman" to teach introductions. And when things got a little tight or difficult, I leaned on humor and compassion.

As this academic year comes to a close, I will not be sad to see it go. I look forward to the fall semester and walking under the elms by the reflection pool once again. I look forward to resting my eyes on my students and checking for signs of confusion or understanding. This year has left its mark on all of us. For me, that mark is one less of academic rigidity and more of balance, and fresh air, and kindness. I wish you all a safe and healthy summer.

P.S. Dr. McNamara's classes are still posted on YouTube. I highly recommend them.



# Spotlight: Gulf Coast Editors on Publishing in a Pandemic

*Gulf Coast* is a bi-annual print journal of literature, art, and critical art writing, but it is also a non-profit, a reading series, and a bi-annual online publication. *Forum* spoke with Editor in Chief, Nick Rattner, and Managing Editor, Emelie Griffin, about their pandemic experience.



*Forum*: How has the COVID 19 pandemic impacted your ability to edit, curate, publish and organize events for our community of writers and readers? Like most experiencing life in lockdown, there have probably been some unique challenges and some unlikely rewards along the way.

Nick Rattner: Man, what a question! There are a lot of cool people at UH: slush meetings, the Reading Series, and the after parties are a great way to get to know folks. I guess that exists in some way online, but, let's be real, it's not the same. Many of us have never met! At the same time, when you think about the fact that we all, and I mean the entire staff of *Gulf Coast*, still managed to get together, share opinions and preferences, and put together two really dope issues of the journal, that is kind of moving. We all care a lot, and it's good to be in that kind of environment, even or especially as the last year has challenged the meaning of "environment" and "to be in." At times, it felt like we were just going through the motions. But the motions do seem to have value, as a special kind of collective labor, especially when collective labor brings a beautiful thing into the world.

*Forum*: *Gulf Coast* takes a collaborative approach to the editorial process. What do you feel you have missed most this year?

Nick Rattner: Well, it's obviously a tremendous bummer not to be able to hang out with people and to have the fun discussions about poems and stories and essays that I think are a formative and indelible part of many students' lives in Houston. The big, all-team meetings and the smaller team meetings were (and will be) a great way to get to know people and to learn how to express aesthetic preferences. And to learn about new authors. And to gossip. To socialize! People in this program tend to have



Have News?

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## Spotlight: Gulf Coast Editors on Publishing in a Pandemic (Cont'd)

strong opinions and can often express them passionately or cleverly, and so that's a big part of the UH education.

*Forum:* Can you talk us through the process of adapting the reading series to COVID 19 protocols, while still prioritizing and honoring the journal's relationship with the Lawndale Arts Center? Most reading series' opted to convene on Zoom. *Gulf Coast* readings, however, have been produced at Lawndale this past year, featuring art alongside literary performance, for a virtual viewing audience on YouTube, Facebook Live, and Instagram Live. What influenced your approach and what have you learned in the process of producing these events?

Emelie Griffin: When it became apparent that pandemic days would last into the fall of 2020, we scrambled to re-envision how the reading series could go on. It was important to me to facilitate events that would feel, for the virtual audience, like collective experiences; and also, to honor the work and effort of participating readers by maintaining an atmosphere of intentional curation. Back then, I was new to Zoom world, and wasn't sure I could achieve both of these goals there. Instead, we decided to prepare readings in advance and then broadcast them, and we filmed mostly inside Lawndale Art Center's galleries. I've since attended some lovely Zoom readings, but I'm glad to have taken the path we did. Special moments emerged—for instance, we were able to feature some of giovanni singleton's visual work along with her reading, and we collaborated with Project Row Houses on beautiful footage for the final reading of the academic year. I'm grateful to Vinh Hoang, our videographer, whose skill, flexibility, and patience were so helpful.

*Forum:* The new issue 33.1 Winter/Spring 2021 just launched. Congratulations! Would each of you mind sharing a favorite piece of art or writing from 33.1 that readers should look out for when their copy arrives in the mail?

Emelie Griffin: Gina Chung's story "Honey and Sun", Eloghosa Osunde's "There is Love at Home", and Maya Sonenberg's radiant essay, "I'm Not Writing About Summer-space."

Nick Rattner: Masha Kisel's story "Fallout" I love, and it's one of the first if not the first publication for her. Aisha Sabatini Sloan's essay "Black Hollywood" is amazing. The Franz Wright poems. And, of course, Vievee Francis' section, especially "Journal of Visitations" by Desiree Cooper and "Lemon Tree" by Eric Cruz.