

Wordplay

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FACULTY RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT:

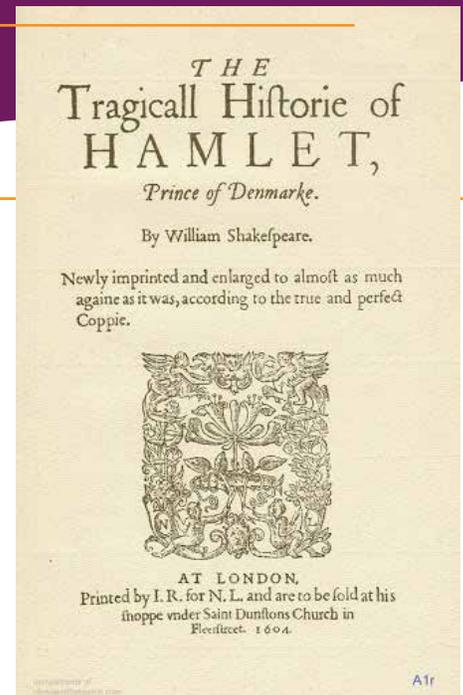
Hamlet Then and Now

“The time is out of joint.” Hamlet’s famous phrase describes his particular situation in the Denmark of Shakespeare’s most famous play. His uncle has murdered his royal father, married his widowed mother, and assumed the Danish throne. And now the Ghost of his dead father commands him to revenge. With its image of a broken body, Hamlet’s phrase had additional resonance for Shakespeare’s contemporaries, who faced deadly plague outbreaks in the years before and after *Hamlet*’s first performances in 1600—outbreaks that would shut the theaters for months at a time. And it resonates for us today, as we contend with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Heather Hirschfeld, Kenneth Curry Professor of English and director of undergraduate studies, studies the ways in which *Hamlet* spoke to its own time and continues to speak to ours. Hirschfeld was invited in late 2015 to edit and provide a 40,000-word introduction for the *New Cambridge Shakespeare Hamlet*, which was published in 2019. She spent the intervening years pursuing the rich themes, plots, characters, and language that have made this play beloved by

audiences around the globe for over four centuries. Because her goal was to design an edition that was scholarly but also student-friendly, she involved her students from the start. In fall 2016, she taught an honors seminar titled *Hamlet 24/7*, which oriented students to the play’s vast critical, performance, and textual histories. The class studied Shakespeare’s predecessors in literary revenge—Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* and Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*—and his successors, including Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and Kuwaiti playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam’s *The Al-Hamlet Summit*.

They also investigated the play’s rich performance history, starting with evidence for productions in London in 1600 and pursuing the play’s place in performance traditions from Russia to Japan to Egypt. They embraced the problems of *Hamlet*’s unusual textual situation, learning about the existence of the three distinct early editions of the play—all with varying claims to authority—and writing about which text they would choose if they were editing the play. Hirschfeld incorporated her seminar students’ research into



her edition, and students from a subsequent class helped her publicize the volume for the press.

Hirschfeld’s work on the play was put to good use when she served as dramaturg—or literary advisor—for the Clarence Brown Theatre’s emotionally powerful production of *Hamlet*, which opened in February 2020. Like so much else that spring, the production was forced to close early because of the COVID pandemic. The time was suddenly out of joint for our world, as it was for Hamlet and his audience in Shakespeare’s age.



MISTY ANDERSON
Professor and Head
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

A Sense of Community

Welcome to the 2020-21 English department newsletter. It has been a strange time to be a new department head, but the creativity, dedication, and intellectual vibrancy of our faculty and students have sustained and inspired me. Together, we found new ways to work, teach, and learn during the pandemic. We used videos and Zoom socials to create a sense of community with majors; we brought dogs to outdoor face-to-face classes; and we continued our scholarship with the help of digital archives, libraries willing to scan or deliver books, and that old practice at the heart of our discipline: reading.

With the help of our Friends of English board, we are launching a pilot mentoring project for English majors, with more than 90 alumni volunteers, including doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, teachers, professors, website developers, technical writers, diplomats, project managers, and non-profit directors, sharing their wisdom and career paths. Our graduate students in English have launched a new young adult book club through the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, which gives away novels with positive role models who look like the young people reading them. We're helping Knoxville area high schools and English teachers through in-service day seminars, continuing the Young Writers Institute, expanding our Frederick Douglass Day events, and launching a new scholarship for first-year English majors. The generosity of donors to the English Enrichment Fund makes these projects possible. We're also finding new national audiences through projects like the PBS-sponsored *Crash Course Linguistics*, co-written by Jessi Grieser, or the Literate podcast on Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* with Urmila Seshagiri.

We have regular features on the website to showcase our faculty, students, and speakers on the Our Stories tile on the main page, as well as content on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, where we welcome your ideas and comments. We also invite you to attend our upcoming Zoom lectures and readings this spring, which include linguists, filmmakers, medievalists, fiction writers, and poets. Just sign up on our alumni poll or follow the instructions for the Zoom link on our departmental website calendar under Public Events at english.utk.edu.

Every day proves the urgent need for imagination and joy, the power of storytelling, and the transformative work empathy must do in our world. English as a discipline cultivates all these things and helps our students become better writers and thinkers. We're honored to be part of this intellectually rich and life-giving tradition, and we look forward to keeping in touch.

Misty Anderson

Rhetoric in Motion



“Rhetoric teaches you have to understand your audience and their emotions and context, and to shape your appeals to them.”

This fall, **Karmen Jones**, an English major concentrating in rhetoric, became the first black woman elected president of the university's Student Government Association. How did she do this during a period of heightened racial tension in America at a place where, as she says, “Only eight percent of the student body looks like me”? According to Jones, her road to the SGA presidency involved a hard-worked campaign with a clear platform—and lots of “five-minute Zoom conversations and coffee chats.”

Her approach as president applies principles of rhetoric to marketing, speeches, and conversations.

“Rhetoric teaches you have to understand your audience and their emotions and context, and to shape your appeals to them,” Jones said.

As president, she and her SGA team work to unite the UT community in ending every kind of harassment and discrimination, fostering racial respect and equality, promoting diversity and inclusion, and providing greater accommodations to students with mental disabilities. Her approach is rhetorical to the core.

“I ask myself, ‘How can I make diversity and inclusion something people want at a mostly white, traditional institution?’ and I realize the key is empathy,” Jones said.

One effective tool for fostering empathy, Jones says, is storytelling—as painful as many stories

can be. Her mother, a speech pathologist who often works with students with mental disabilities, acquainted Jones with literature from an early age.

“My mom would make me read books all the time, even when I didn't want to read,” Jones said. “She would laminate words and hang them up around the house. I got an early education in the power of words to shape our minds and feelings. Actually, literature inspired me to study rhetoric.”

After graduating, Jones plans a gap year with the Southern Economic Advancement Project, which was launched in 2019 by Stacey Abrams. Then comes law school, where Jones wants to specialize in civil rights law. Looking into the more distant future, Jones says she'd love to serve the state of Tennessee someday as a political representative. Her prowess in rhetoric and leadership will serve her well as she follows this trajectory.

When asked what advice she has for leaders, whether in SGA or elsewhere, she replied, “It's important to know you can be yourself and hold your core values, and still make appeals to anybody. You have to know that being yourself, and whatever is good, will work. At first, I'd been worried I wouldn't resonate at ‘only eight percent black’ UT. But with awareness of the space you're in and empathetic understanding of people, things work.”

That seems like excellent advice for becoming a powerful rhetorician and a great leader.

A Natural Curiosity

When **Michael Dennis** was a seventh- and eighth-grade student in Mansfield, Georgia, he learned English grammar and composition from a demanding and inspiring teacher. The respect for language that she imparted stayed with him as he earned a PhD in botany at UT and pursued a career as an environmental ecologist. As president of his natural resources-based environmental consulting firm in Florida and the author of numerous articles and reports on wetlands management and other topics, he stresses the importance of writing to his own success and that of others in his field.

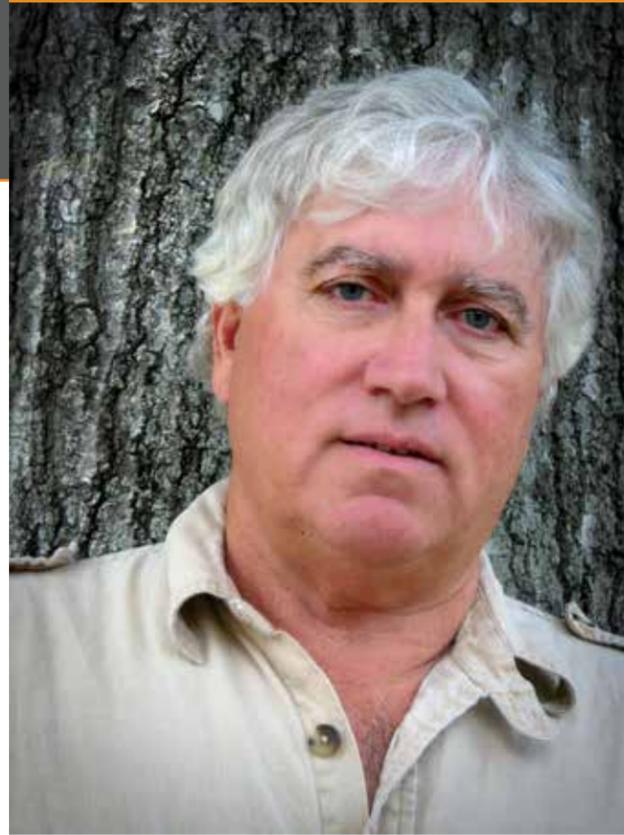
“Writing and being able to take material—in this case, scientific data and other material—and put it into a cogent report that reads well is a very important skill for the sciences,” said Dennis, who, as a break from the tightly-structured conventions of scientific writing, also writes poetry on his own.

Dennis’s connection to the University of Tennessee remains strong, and he has been generous with his time and financial support.

“If you’ve appreciated the teachers you’ve had, there’s a time when you should give back something,” he said. “It may be that you give back a little; it may be that you give back a lot.”

In addition to serving on several alumni boards and volunteering in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology for decades, he has funded a number of student grants and prizes in the English department. In recent years, his donations have supported undergraduate and graduate creative writing awards and enabled students to participate in the department’s off-campus Drama in New York course. The notes he receives from students attest to the impact of his generosity.

Describing his love for writing and literature, Dennis speaks eloquently about the difference that English has made in his life and career. When asked what science, in turn, can offer students in English and other humanities, he speaks from his own childhood experience.



“It’s one thing to wander in the fields and forests and say, ‘Isn’t this beautiful,’ but if you know the names of the plants, it’s another whole realm of appreciation and understanding.”

From his perspective, writing, literature, and life itself are enriched by the natural curiosity that gives rise to science. As he suggests with a twinkle in his eye, “I don’t think you can live by Shakespeare’s sonnets alone.”

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Literature and Natural Theology

Lucas Nossaman made his first pilgrimage to Concord, Massachusetts, the summer after his first year in the PhD program. He had come to give a paper at the Thoreau Society’s celebration of the 200-year anniversary of Thoreau’s birthday. For many Thoreau enthusiasts, Walden Pond was the central point of attraction, but what also intrigued Nossaman was where the conference took place: First Parish Church of Concord. Though the old meetinghouse where Thoreau had been baptized and eulogized had burned down in 1900, for Nossaman it felt historically evocative for the nature writer Terry Tempest Williams to be speaking on environmental and Indigenous justice from the rebuilt First Parish pulpit.

Nossaman’s dissertation, “These Objects Make a World: Religion and Emergent Ecology in Nineteenth-Century American Literature,” examines a fugitive moment in the mid-nineteenth century before American natural science began to be practiced primarily by professionally trained scientists and organized into specialized disciplines. In this transitional period, naturalists made enormous strides toward the modern concept of nature as an ecological web of life. Starting in 1845, the world-renowned German naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt began publishing his five-volume *Cosmos*, an international bestseller that aspired to hold together in unity natural science’s latest findings. Rather than eclipsing religious perspectives, *Cosmos* seemed to many Americans to



provide a new account of what was then called natural theology—the study of God in nature.

Humboldt’s work inspired US naturalists and literary writers to recalibrate natural theologies for a richly interconnected natural world. Nossaman, in turn, explores *Cosmos* as a touchstone text in the development of nineteenth-century American literature, inspiring Thoreau’s writings, Susan Fenimore Cooper’s groundbreaking ecological account of her New York village, *Rural Hours* (1850), and even Southern novelist William Gilmore Simms’s pro-imperialism rendition of the natural world in *The Cassique of Kiawah* (1859).

Essential to Nossaman’s work are nineteenth-century archives of science writing and natural theology. He was awarded the Thoreau Society’s graduate student fellowship, a \$1,000 award to fund Thoreau-related research in the greater Boston area. Although

COVID-19 has disrupted his plans to visit archives, librarians have aided his research greatly by digitizing materials for him to use. This year he holds a highly competitive Humanities Center graduate student fellowship. Professor Dawn Coleman, his dissertation director, praises Nossaman as a junior scholar who “brings passion and scholarly precision to his study of how nineteenth-century writers integrated science and faith. His literary analysis joins recent work in secular studies showing that secularization is a fluid, complex process that we are only beginning to understand.” His work will help us do so.

Internships in Industry



The job market is always challenging for new graduates, but during the pandemic, it has been unusually difficult—especially in the humanities. One way students can give themselves a leg up is by serving industry internships, where they develop and apply communication skills in real-world settings. After graduation, when they're looking for full-time work, they can market themselves to potential employers as information designers with workplace experience under their belts.

Internships are available to students majoring or minoring in English, at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Students serving internships can earn academic credit for their work via independent study. Usually, internships require commitments of 10 to 12 hours per week during a full semester, though summer internships at more hours per week are also available, both locally and abroad. Interns usually earn paychecks as well, but the real payoffs are marketplace experience, education, and networking.

The Division of Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics, particularly the professors in technical communication, supervise most of our internships. Russel Hirst runs internships associated with industry and government sites (ORNL, Y-12), as well as with the journal he edits, the *International Journal of Nuclear Security*. Sean Morey runs internships associated with journalism, media,

community initiatives, and other sites, such as *Cityview Magazine*, *WBIR Channel 10*, and *The Central Collective*.

These days we stay connected with each other via email, LinkedIn, Facebook, and all manner of social media, so it's not hard to monitor the success of many of our grads. We see when they're looking for jobs and when they land jobs and advance in their professions. When we look at their online self-marketing—on LinkedIn, for example—we see the prominence they give to their UT English education and to the internships they completed and the professional connections they made here. The impact of these experiences is undeniable.

"My former boss actually told me the internship with *IJNS* is what made my resume stand out from the others she received," said alumna Elizabeth Kirby. "Despite lacking the five years of experience listed in the job description, I got an interview and was able to present myself as capable, a quick learner, and suitable for the position. That first job opened up other opportunities and interviews, leading me to where I am today in my current role as a technical writer/editor at ORNL."

Our students continue to testify to the value of internships they served. Just ask Kirby or her happily employed fellow English graduates.

Ethan Barlow: Intern Exemplar

An English major concentrating in technical communication, **Ethan Barlow** interned with the *International Journal of Nuclear Security*. He edited a variety of documents, articles, and even a book. He interviewed experts and wrote pieces on them for the *IJNS* newsletter. He read about international communication, attended Zoom meetings with the journal team, and watched webinars on nuclear security.

Barlow edited both for *IJNS* and for some of the journal's international volunteers and friends. The journal's review coordinator—Hubert Foy, director of the African Centre for Science and International Security—wrote to Ethan: "Congratulations on your excellent work, and thank you for your significant contribution to our organization's success. We are implementing your recommendations for all the documents, meeting our objectives, and hope that it will give you pleasure to see your work in use." This is high praise from a prominent professional in international nuclear security.

Barlow graduates in fall 2021. What does his future hold? Recognizing the value of internships, he recently landed another one with Fast Enterprises, a Colorado software company.

"Just the kind of job I was hoping for when I chose English as my career path," said Barlow, who, like other students in our department, uses internships as a fast track to success.



Welcoming Iliana Rocha



Iliana Rocha joined our department this year as an assistant professor in poetry writing. She earned her PhD in literature and creative writing from Western Michigan University.

Rocha is the 2019 winner of the Berkshire Prize for a First or Second Book of Poetry for her newest collection, *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*, which is forthcoming from Tupelo Press. *Karankawa*, her debut poetry collection, won the 2014 AWP Donald Hall Prize for Poetry. *Inocencio* chronicles Rocha's obsession with the 1971 murder of her grandfather, Inocencio Rodriguez, a decade before she was born. Because the details of his death were (and are) terribly unclear, part of how the family kept him alive was to share the different versions of his death they heard. The manuscript is framed around these various accounts, as the speakers reconfigure a past that is mysterious and tenuous, clouded by distance, language, and time.

The recipient of a 2020 CantoMundo Fellowship and 2019 MacDowell Colony fellowship, Rocha has had her work featured in the *Best New Poets 2014* anthology, as well as *The Nation*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Latin American Literature Today*, among others. She currently serves as poetry co-editor for *Waxwing Literary Journal*. Her three chihuahuas Nilla, Beans, and Migo are the loves of her life.

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Mary Dzon's graduate Medieval literature class gathered for a socially-distanced outdoor discussion.

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