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Editor
Horacio Sierra

Editorial Assistant
Kevin Lopez Cruz

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The Mid-Atlantic Review is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published annually by the College English Association Mid-Atlantic Group (CEAMAG). The journal specializes in literary and cultural criticism, discussions of pedagogy, public humanities work, reviews of scholarly books published in the last two years, personal essays concerned with the teaching of English, photographs and visual art related to the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, and creative writing related to the humanities, teaching, or the craft and art of writing. *The Mid-Atlantic Review* is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography and available to scholars through the EBSCO and ProQuest Literature databases.

Research articles and essay submissions must be between 2,000 and 5,000 words and be prepared in accordance with the most recent MLA style manual; reviews of scholarly books must be limited to 1,000 words; photographs and visual art must be submitted as JPG files with a maximum of three pieces; poetry submissions must be limited to 500 words per poem with a maximum of three poem submissions (all sent in one file); and short fiction must be limited to 1,500 words with a maximum of one short fiction submission. Poetry and short fiction must be related to the humanities, teaching, or the craft and art of writing. We do not publish work that has been already published in print or online. You are free to submit your work to other publications when submitting it to *The Mid-Atlantic Review*.

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AI Stories: A Faculty Respond to a Changing Seascape

Tejan Green Waszak, Ethna Dempsey Lay, and Daisy Miller

Stories matter. And the stories surrounding the AI-drenched environment in higher education are increasingly important. Faculty narrate how generative AI (GAI) has disrupted their ideas about what writing and learning are and what they might be. There are a lot of AI stories - each one successively pulled by each new technological wave and changing tide. At Hofstra University, we found ourselves standing knee-deep in the ocean of AI—a water level that rises and falls with each coming wave—and we began gathering our colleagues' stories as a way to measure, curate, and later archive what is happening now, as a way to fathom how deep the water is, how strong the riptide, and how we can learn to navigate.[1] What we call AI stories captures a specific time period on our campus when conversations around GAI ebb and flow. This article documents faculty attitudes about the new AI reality, demonstrating the value of our narratives as an archive that

[1] Hofstra is a mid-sized R2 university a half hour outside of New York City.

analyzes the affective dimensions of technological change.

In *The Coming Wave*, Mustafa Suleyman considers an origin story relying on a flood myth to explain technological advancement, noting: “Permeating humanity’s oral traditions and ancient writings is the idea of a giant wave sweeping everything in its path, leaving the world remade and reborn” (5). The flood myth is characterized by seasonal change, both destructive and constructive. It is really difficult to assess any kind of change when one is in the middle of it. For this reason, we thought it important to record faculty narratives as the technology keeps changing. Each person in our study brings unique ideas and experiences about GAI—their own AI story. Together, these stories reflect the perspectives of our faculty at this juncture and the conversations happening on campus. They are something we can look to years from now to identify how that thinking evolved. In considering shared narratives, author Brené Brown's Atlas of the Heart is useful—the author identifies “story stewardship” as “honoring the sacred nature of story—the ones we share and the ones we hear—and knowing that we’ve been entrusted with something valuable or

that we have something valuable that we should treat with respect and care" (Brown). And our stories are sacred, reflecting our earnest hopes to be effective teachers and communicators. These stories represent our curiosity and our frustration, our optimism and also our fear.

In our approach to this work, we use storying as an epistemology. This approach participates in the tradition used by Cynthia Selfe in Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) and others, as David Head explains: "[S]tories do not necessarily give a 'capital 'T' Truth'; they do provide 'perspectival glimpses' into the social and contextual layers that comprise the story" (Head). Story collections, then, offer a way of knowing that relies on individual narratives that convey emotion, something not always accounted for quantitatively. A distant reading of our faculty's AI stories sets the stage for the important work of the archive as a kind of overview that helps us visualize attitudes, trends, and movement in the narratives. But the stories themselves provide a different way of understanding our community relevant to the way we know things. We are honored to serve as stewards of our colleagues' AI stories. The impact of their stories both moves (and removes) us from the various reactions of faculty working

through and working with GAI. In Yuval Harari's Sapiens, and again in Nexus, the author identifies the power of storytelling and its importance to humanity especially with respect to the idea that stories create cooperation. Cooperation matters to faculty, the symbiotic cooperation of instructors that surfaces when we listen to each others' stories.

We went in with two key questions: (i) What do varying ideas around the place of AI in writing show about this time period? and (ii) How might capturing faculty stories regarding the place of AI in writing in pedagogical practice help us to find ways forward in navigating rapid technological advancement? This research represents the period from May 2025 to June 2026, when three researchers in the Department of Writing Studies and Rhetoric at Hofstra University collected their colleagues' stories from multiple disciplines. These faculty stories document their experience working with and coping with GAI as we learn where we are and where we might go with this evolving technology.

This collection of "AI Stories" focuses on faculty stories, because as faculty, we are charged with shaping the programs which will undoubtedly be impacted (and perhaps upended) by GAI.[2]

Because all three researchers are faculty in the Department of Writing Studies and Rhetoric, the advent of GAI impacted our pedagogy immediately and directly. We have differing ideas about how AI will play out in the university, but we shared an interest in how our colleagues would respond to our university's adoption of ChatGPT as a learning/research agent—provided to students and faculty free of charge. In a 2024 panel at the National Competitiveness Forum, our university president emphasized the importance of teaching students GAI for job preparedness: "In the future, it's going to be those graduates who are going to have an upper hand because, as in a lot of new technologies, it's going to be the students teaching the employers how to use it, not the other way around" (Jerome). Some faculty reacted favorably to this subscription: "I view AI within my own teaching . . . as a good way to think about accessibility and to also think about equity," but others had doubts: "AI plays a role in the classroom and not in ways that I like right now."

Our institution's decision to purchase a private license to ChatGPT is part of the story we tell. We document how GAI profoundly impacts our students' experience, and we forecast its

[2] In a future study, we will be collecting students' stories about AI.

potential influence on them post-graduation. As faculty, we encounter GAI disruption in our classrooms. We polled faculty about their use of GAI in their research as well, but for this project, we restrict our focus to teaching. It has initiated a narrative that, we feel, is important to hear.

As expected, participating faculty expressed ideas about their intentionality: why they use or do not use GAI in their pedagogy or research. They expressed concerns related to GAI ethics and limitations; they discussed their particular disciplinary orientation; and they emphasized GAI's perceived impact on student learning and equity. At first, many faculty seemed quite hopeful about the prospects for GAI adoption in their pedagogy and research. But a distant reading of the transcripts from faculty interviews teaches us something else about their orientation to GAI, one that is more tentative and less confident about its place. It is a story that is changing.

Participating faculty self-selected, representing a small sample (n=41) of users curious about sharing and discovering the potential of GAI and its possible role in higher education. Participation in this study suggests something meaningful about the faculty's attitude in incorporating GAI in their work. By contrast, some faculty rejected the invitation. Their non-participation is not recorded in these AI Stories. That silent story is

compelling but cannot be addressed except by marking its absence. Another subgroup of faculty deflected participation to a future date, often noting that they had not truly committed to any AI Story. Faculty in this group were in the process of evaluating and re-evaluating the place of GAI in their pedagogy before they shared their stories.

Methods

We take a multi-layered, mixed methods approach to our study and each of the researcher's strategies for meaning making neatly joins to support the overall findings of our work. We gathered data by various means: in surveys, by low-stakes writing, in conversation at workshops, and in video interviews. Our participants at times actually lean into their discussions and our invitations to attend events, book clubs, and dinners, desiring physical proximity and physical books in cultivating our understanding of our shifting experience. For this essay, we limit our analysis to faculty survey responses and to the transcripts of the faculty video interviews.

Surveys

During the spring 2025 semester, 41 faculty across disciplines participated in a survey investigating their use of GAI in their pedagogy and research. The resulting data represent this particular moment of GAI

adoption on our campus. For instance, we learned that faculty primarily use ChatGPT, either the free or paid version. Since GAI materialized most obviously in student writing, and since our home department is Writing Studies and Rhetoric, we began with an invitation to comment on exactly this point. Further, when asked to articulate the role of writing in their classrooms, faculty noted its powerful presence, calling it "tremendous," "central," "significant," and "everything." One commented: "Writing is an occasion for reflecting on the significance and relevance of material covered in class to students' lives or an occasion to explore ideas and issues raised by assigned readings, etc., often prior to discussing them at length orally." Of the 41 respondents, only one recorded that writing played no role in class.

Survey respondents nearly unanimously accorded writing as the primary assessment means. Significantly, in the wake of GAI, the faculty surveyed, regardless of discipline, continue to rely on writing to offer proof of learning. At the same time, they now question writing's ability to demonstrate a course's objectives.

Another pair of questions asks respondents whether or not they give feedback on writing, and if so, whether or not they enlist GAI to give students feedback. Their responses are nearly absolute: 97.5% of faculty give feedback on writing but do not enlist GAI. In the very broadest sense,

these findings suggest faculty's distrust of GAI as useful for feedback. The data reflect that faculty dismiss GAI for writing assessment. More tests will have to be conducted to learn why faculty have adopted this stance and whether, as time goes on, their attitudes towards it will have changed.

By contrast, faculty have a very different response to questions about encouraging or discouraging student use of GAI. Faculty surveyed approach student use of GAI relatively progressively, although the questions asked positively (85.4%) and then negatively (63.4%) do not accord. (We would have thought these ratios would have been more closely aligned).

The faculty who discouraged student use of GAI explained their choice. Their skepticism about GAI and learning arise from disciplinary and ethical concerns, but these questions fall outside the scope of this study. Instead, the researchers focused on the survey question: "Are you considering a role for AI in your classroom that you have not yet implemented?" Faculty responded with a nearly 50/50 split (53.7% favorably, 46.3% negatively). This captures a kind of optimism (or, at least, a sort of admission) for AI to play a part in their pedagogy.

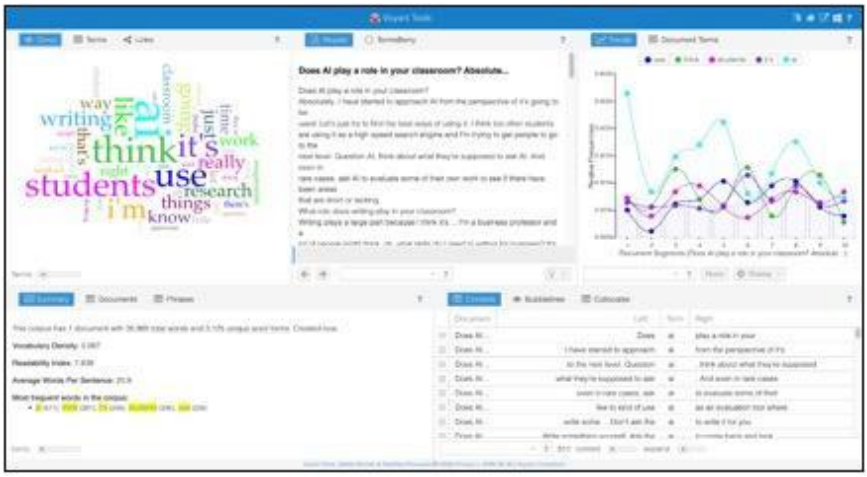
It is noteworthy that the faculty's response "I don't know" comes up in different forms with respect to how AI will play a role in their classrooms. One participant stated "I have to admit that I am not sure. Ideas come up as I teach." Significantly, this response suggests a general uncertainty about the viability of AI in our teaching. Clearly, faculty are still writing their AI stories.

Transcripts from Video Interviews

To date, the researchers have interviewed twelve faculty from across our institution, representing a variety of disciplines, including Biology, Education, Engineering, English, Mathematics, Marketing, Political Science, Religion, Rhetoric, and Writing Studies. The research questions repeat the survey questions, but a video interview affords more time for storytelling. The transcripts of the interviews provide significant data about our faculty's current experience of GAI. To better understand what faculty reveal about student use of GAI, we enlisted the Voyant suite of tools to engage in a distant reading of their aggregated responses. The Voyant suite of tools was designed for scholarly work with prestige literary texts and not for the discourse analysis of interview transcripts.

Instead of analyzing how experts write, the Voyant tools can be used to evaluate different qualities of language in the interview transcripts. This

investigation proves valid in a variety of ways, because a distant reading of the transcripts provides the opportunity to do a sentiment analysis of the faculty's GAI experiences relevant to their teaching. Sentiment analysis reveals important material useful for understanding faculty's integration of AI in their pedagogy. The aggregated transcripts are data that can be understood as evidence of faculty attitudes and often suggest interesting insights. After a corpus of video transcripts is uploaded into Voyant, its text is revealed in five programs in a default skin.[3]



The [Summary] program (at lower left) displays language quantitatively. For instance, the category Vocabulary Density offers researchers a way to characterize the lexical variety of the interviewees. Vocabulary Density is a measurement of the vocabulary usage relative to the length of the

[3] All of the programs in the Voyant's default skin can be substituted for others

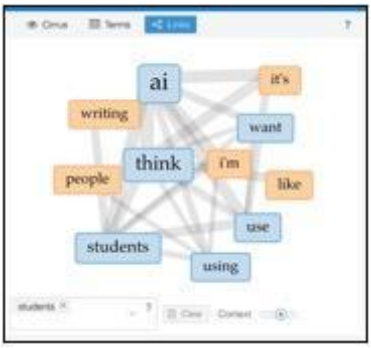
document. It can be likened to tabulating "how many words will be read on average before a new word is encountered" (Sinclair). This calculation invites the researchers to consider the efficacy of any word or phrase and to theorize the import of its meaning in context.

The Voyant suite of tools was used to produce the following results: twelve faculty spoke for about 30-40 minutes each, generating a small corpus totaling over 35,931 words, with 3,125 unique word forms, yielding a lexical density of 0.087, on par with William Shakespeare and Jane Austen. Average words per sentence for this set is 20.9, higher than the readability index of seventeen words. The fourth most frequent word in the corpus is "students" (245x). Clearly, our colleagues center students in their pedagogy and with respect to their ideas about GAI. The term, "student*," is most frequently collocated with "think," "use," "using," and "want."



Enlarging the context for the [Links] program reveals a more nuanced understanding of what these faculty shared, namely their focus on student use of AI and its relationship to learning and critical thinking.

Moreover, using the [Trends] program, a user can generate a line graph that expresses the relative frequencies of a term across the corpus. When faculty share their AI stories, [Trends] reveals that individual faculty cluster negative sentiments like “tricky,” “struggling,” “plagiarism,” “problem,” and “bias” while their positive sentiments “important,” “helpful,” “interesting,” “good,” and “creative” occur more regularly at intervals across their responses. These results suggest some concentrated and nagging discomfort with AI’s place in their classes. For example, not one adopted GAI to comment on student writing. While these faculty participants are curious to welcome GAI opportunities and its related praxis, they express discomfort in their own and students’ capability to work with GAI productively.



The kinds of visual representations that the Voyant affords are a necessary part of understanding our institutional AI Stories, which are multiple and fluid. In *Critical Data Storytelling in the Composition Classroom,* Angela Laflen enlists the use of data as storytelling in ways applicable to this argument, in that data storytelling offers a critical lens on this archive. The AI Stories archive represents a kind of assemblage, suggesting the interplay of contingency and structure, of organization and change. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari specify that archives represent "a multiplicity—but we don't know yet what the multiple entails when it is no longer attributed, that is, after it has been elevated to the status of substantive. One side of a machinic assemblage faces the strata, which doubtless make it a kind of organism, or signifying totality, or determination attributable to a subject" (4). This distinction is useful to this discussion because it validates the importance of archives. While the distant reading paradoxically offers a means of teasing out granular responses (words) and simultaneously providing an overview of

our responders' reactions (percentages), the data sits as a community archive. It provides traces of emergent behavior and attitudes.

Research and Analysis

What we've been building is not just an archive in the traditional sense. Rather than a static repository of interviews, this project is better understood as a dynamic system that reflects how faculty are making sense of GAI in real time. Drawing on Jenny Rice's notion of rhetorical ecologies in *Awful Archives*, these recordings exist within a broader network of technological change, institutional pressures, disciplinary norms, personal experimentation, and resistance. What the archive preserves, then, is both what people think about GAI and the conditions under which those ideas are emerging, including many of the uncertainties and the evolving strategies that come with encountering rapidly shifting software.

Terry Cook has characterized the "fourth archival paradigm," as one in which archiving has moved from "evidence to memory to identity and community" (Cook 117). In this model, those from within the community create their own storehouses of memory, practicing "stewardship and enunciation of their archive through a range of participatory practices. Mentoring becomes a key role for archivists, as does responding to and

facilitating community interests by helping to connect community archives together with each other and with mainstream archives" (Carlin 100). To the extent that the three of us functioned as archivists, we also conceived of ourselves as both mentors and mentees. We created the physical and intellectual space for conversations, and while we might have initiated discussion with writing prompts and book giveaways, we very much saw ourselves as imbricated in the experience with our colleagues.

The value of this archive is less about preservation for its own sake and more about what it enables over time. It serves as infrastructure for ongoing sense-making: a resource that faculty, researchers, and administrators can return to in order to trace patterns, revisit early assumptions, and inform future decisions about praxis. It captures something often lost once practices stabilize (if in fact they do). By storing those early signals, the archive creates opportunities for reference, reuse, and reinterpretation across contexts, allowing different stakeholders to take it up in ways that interest them (policy, practice, research, etc.). Performance scholar Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire is especially useful here, since our video interviews capture not only what faculty say, but how they say it: tone, pacing, hesitation, and expression. Drawing further on Taylor's formulation, our "texts" are archival, but they capture a "repertoire" of embodied reactions to a

moment in our encounter with GAI. Thus, they preserve traces of (an aura) what we thought at this moment. In fact, quite a few of the participants registered the ephemeral nature of their emotional and practical reactions. The phrase “right now” recurs over thirty times among our subjects in reference to an approach or reaction to teaching with GAI. Just as the archive allows for us to note a moment in time, the participants themselves seem to be keenly aware of the ephemerality of their responses.

So, what do we notice in our shared archived experience? We see specifically it offers us the affective dimension of technological change. One faculty member recounts a “heartbreaking” experience in a course when a student uploaded a fellow student writer’s work to a GAI platform without permission.

The impact, the professor notes, was felt well beyond the two students involved. The rest of the class expressed discomfort at this experience. This moment serves as one of the more salient examples of early unintentional ethical GAI stress testing. Faculty members identify various ethical quandaries. The impact of GAI beyond our classrooms and the confounding variables animate many responses. One professor reflects on exactly this:

From my perspective, when I see students interacting with these technologies with a parasocial component, I think it speaks to a larger concern —what does this AI say about our relationships with each other? . . . I don't think we can get away from . . . the fact that ChatGPT comes out [around] November of 2022. This is two years after we're in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic where people are more distant from each other. And I can't help but think that there's some relationship between the way our social lives were changed two years prior and when the ChatGPT product comes out.

Here we see reverberations of a post phenomenologist concept that humans and technology are always intertwined; the question we should ask centers on "how AI mediates humans' relation to the world and try to actively shape these mediations while we still can" (Coeckelbergh 45).

The ethical, social, and practical ramifications of this new technology undergirded many of the stories we heard in ways that went beyond pedagogy or research, yet frequently circled back to our role in the classroom. Another professor expressed his recurrent concern that students understand what they're losing when they offload work to GAI, which speaks to the need for students to be aware of AI's ethical dimensions in their own intellectual and professional life.

The ethical concerns signal deeply human connections and the importance of providing space and time to reflect collectively. Participants, upon entering or leaving our recording studio, attending various AI-centered events, or encountering us on campus, frequently remarked on their appreciation for these moments of having face-to-face conversations. In fact, we can understand the archive as a living, expanding, accreting collection of, what Rice calls, "ordinary and extraordinary experiences in public life that leave lasting, palpable residues, which then become our sources—our resources—for public discourse" (17). Stewarding these stories into a shared space, our voices will remain part of the Burkean parlor – focused as it is "right now" on GAI.

To conclude interviews, we routinely asked participants if they had anything they'd like to add, and many gave additional insight that demonstrated attention to the student/teacher relationship and the bigger picture relevant to the responsibility educators have to students. We see three powerful "tricky" concerns highlighted. Some alluded or directly referenced how access to these agents might change in years to come, highlighting the need for students to acquire strategies without having to resort to GAI. One participant said, "I think the really tricky bit is that I, as a faculty member, I'm expected to impart knowledge and skills to these

students, but I don't have knowledge and skills about AI. I'm sort of figuring it out at the same time. And it's a little bit hard for me to do in part because . . . well, AI came to me at a point in my intellectual development when I was an expert in a particular area." This response points out the advantage of discernment and having acquired a particular skillset before the mass incorporation of GAI agents, but also the disadvantage students might have in learning a subject area alongside GAI agents.

Another concern expressed was uncertainty tied to developing technology in terms of policy: "[O]ne of the things we're trying to do is keep up with policy in all aspects of AI use and how involved is the federal government going to be in AI policy creation or at the state level and certainly in higher education at the institutional level and it's really, really tricky to develop a set of policies that are going to remain evergreen." This statement speaks to the ethical concerns many educators have. An important aspect of this concern points to how AI may be regulated in the future.

Another participant pointed out the benefit of GAI in addressing accessibility concerns and the need for faculty to keep current with changing technology: "Things are evolving all the time. Our understanding of the human condition and human communication is an

evolution. So I use AI . . . to keep us on the cutting edge, and I like to remind my colleagues that we are also always learning." This interviewee notes the advantages of faculty actively attending to GAI. The stories we hear share that the AI story has two distinct strands, one that demands active learning relevant to GAI and the other that requires learning without GAI.

Conclusion

Faculty stories are changing, almost as fast as generative artificial intelligence. We are finding that our own perspectives evolve as we experience each other's stories. So, what is the story that emerges and how do we read an archive of these stories, especially a fast moving one? After all, these stories demand our engagement as scholars, teachers, and human beings. Clearly, the AI Story, or rather AI Stories, are constantly being rewritten. It has already been a year since our study started. We are even more involved with GAI than we were in spring 2025. Where we stand now in our study is moving from independent stories into a collective story. Though the goal remains to prioritize students' active learning and communication, faculty bring different values. Our findings represent individual experiences as well as the intersection of humans and technology.

The stories we've collected from our institution convey that while some respondents show skepticism and provide good reason, others are curious and open. What is highlighted in our AI stories is the complexity of the role of GAI in higher education. Our repertoire, which existed before we began gathering our data, evolves as an archive. We continue to gather stories and record moments.

One thing that cannot be ignored, no matter the view, is that GAI is becoming increasingly integrated into our academic setting and our everyday life, and thus there is a need to understand the nuances of faculty stories and how, going forward, our approaches can inform one another. Because Hofstra adopted ChatGPT for faculty and students, it was imperative that we contend with the implication for ourselves and our students. It should be noted that this subscription was purchased without faculty or student consultation. While we were in the midst of our own disciplinary stories as educators, the arrival of ChatGPT on our campus introduced a plot twist.

We believe these faculty stories capture something valuable during this time, and engaging these multiple viewpoints encourages thoughtful conversations about writing and thinking. Equipped with the knowledge acquired from our study, we can further consider approaches that best serve our students without compromising the values of faculty. In

response to our key research questions, faculty recognize that we are in a time of flux.

Their responses run the gamut—they are curious, wary, open, and troubled. These interviews offer individual strands that contribute to our larger university's history. Each story marks a moment we can return to in order to understand where we were and where we are along the human journey of AI and the university.

Endnotes

1. The researchers gratefully acknowledge the support of Hofstra University's Provost's Office and the receipt of an internal grant to conduct the programs associated with this research.
2. In this article, the authors use the terms "GAI" and "AI" at different points. We wish to identify generative artificial intelligence separate from the larger classification of artificial intelligence. In some interviews and distributed surveys, the term "AI" is used interchangeably with "GAI" when referencing "GAI." In those areas, we keep the used terminology. Elsewhere, in discussing large language models, we use "GAI" since it serves as a more exact reference to content generating AI systems.
3. To document Hofstra faculty's thoughts on AI in their professional lives (both scholarship and teaching), we received IRB approval ("Hofstra Faculty Stories: On AI and Writing" HUIRB Approval Reference Number: 20250523-WSR-HCL-GRE-1 to invite faculty from across the university to complete a survey and participate in workshops and video interviews. Contributing faculty signed a consent form acknowledging their participation and agreeing to the use of their contributions in publication and in the Canvas-protected archive.
4. The DALN (thedaln.org) is a publicly available archive of personal literacy narratives in a variety of formats (text, video, audio) that together provide a historical record of the literacy practices and values of contributors, as those practices and values change.

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Poet Celebrates First Sale by Taking Wife Out for A&W (Value Menu Only)

Chris Clemens

Feast upon the bounty provided by my mind!
was something we couldn't help overhear
the poet say. Standing astride an ochre plastic
table he proudly displayed to the restaurant
his PayPal balance: not zero! Some
nodded in appreciation and
working folk clinked their frosty mugs.
Then the creative man gestured
with gusto to the harshly-lit screen
featuring discounted items. His many
futures slid through our minds like hot grease.
Would she choose the buddy burger or the little
chicken? We waited breathlessly while his wife
vaped outside. Seems she didn't want a Mama
burger. Soon breathless became restless.

Read us your story!
It's actually a poem.
Read us your poem!
It's not that kind of poem.
Well what good is it then?

Here the meagre PayPal balance was produced
once again with great satisfaction
where the manager interceded
to say A&W does not in fact accept
PayPal. Trembling slightly, the poet
pats his pockets and looks around
for his wife wisely
long gone in a rideshare.
In desperation he turns and
turns
and turns

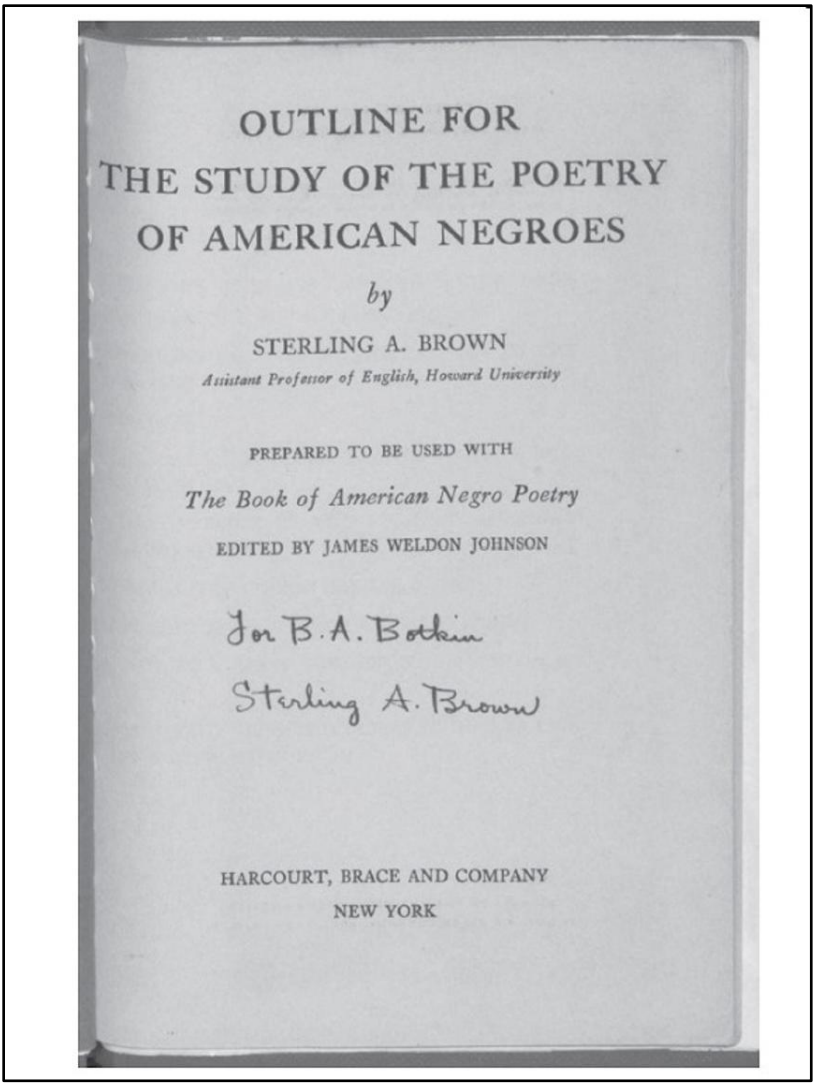
Sterling A. Brown, Son of a Preacher Man

John Saillant

In 1930, Sterling A. Brown published three poems and two essays, one of the latter co-authored, in a landmark collection, *Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany*, edited by his friend, B. A. Botkin (1901–1975; see figure 1 for an inscription by Brown to Botkin). These works distinguished him, in several ways, from his father, Sterling N. Brown (1858–1929). The elder Brown, one year dead at this time, had begun as a faculty member at Howard University in Washington, D.C. in 1892, while the younger Brown had recently returned to his birthplace to teach at Howard after college and graduate school in Massachusetts and a stint teaching in Virginia. In Washington, D.C., the Browns, father and son, were able to maintain ties with a variety of Black Southerners even as they established themselves in, respectively, modern intellectual and artistic life. The 1930 publication was the first appearance in print of "Southern Road" and the four related works. All dealt in folklore, either descriptively or creatively. Two years later, Brown's collection, *Southern Road*, was published, a major book that has attracted scholarly attention (Gabbin, "Sterling Brown's Poetic Voice"; Gabbin, *Sterling Brown*; Anderson; Sanders; Richards, "Sterling Brown"). However, no scholar has considered the 1930 works as a unit (S. A. Brown, "Southern Road" *et al*) including Ina

Annett's linoleum cut of a chain gang (see figure 2), which was not reproduced in the book *Southern Road*. Here I consider the five works and the accompanying illustration as a unity, separate from later reprintings (see O'Meally for a full bibliography).

These works reflected the Browns' life in Washington, D.C. The late 1920s were a watershed moment for father and son in melding the folk with theology and the arts. In the 1920s, at Howard, father and son were at the nexus of folk culture, modern theology, and the arts. Each man exploited this situation. Later, the younger Brown turned against Howard because he saw the administration, the faculty, and the many of the students as dismissive of the rural South. He made common cause in the 1950s and early 1960s with a small body of Civil Rights student activists. A brilliant remembrance by Ekwueme Michael Thelwell (b. 1939) includes Brown's determination to tutor his students in the "character and evolution of black popular culture, peopled with old friends like Ma Rainey, Billie Holiday, Leadbelly, Fats Waller, Satchmo, the 'Duke,' Paul Robeson, all leavened by Sterling Brown's remarkable capacious mind and analytical intelligence. And naturally—inevitably–to lead us down those long Southern roads, almost as though prophetically, he was arming us culturally and psychologically for the people most of us would be working with in the Mississippi Delta" (Thelwell 266).



OUTLINE FOR
THE STUDY OF THE POETRY
OF AMERICAN NEGROES

by

STERLING A. BROWN

Assistant Professor of English, Howard University

PREPARED TO BE USED WITH

The Book of American Negro Poetry

EDITED BY JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

For B. A. Botkin
Sterling A. Brown

HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY
NEW YORK

Figure 1: Title page of Sterling A. Brown, Outline for the Study of the Poetry of American Negroes *(1931), inscribed by Brown to B. A. Botkin.*

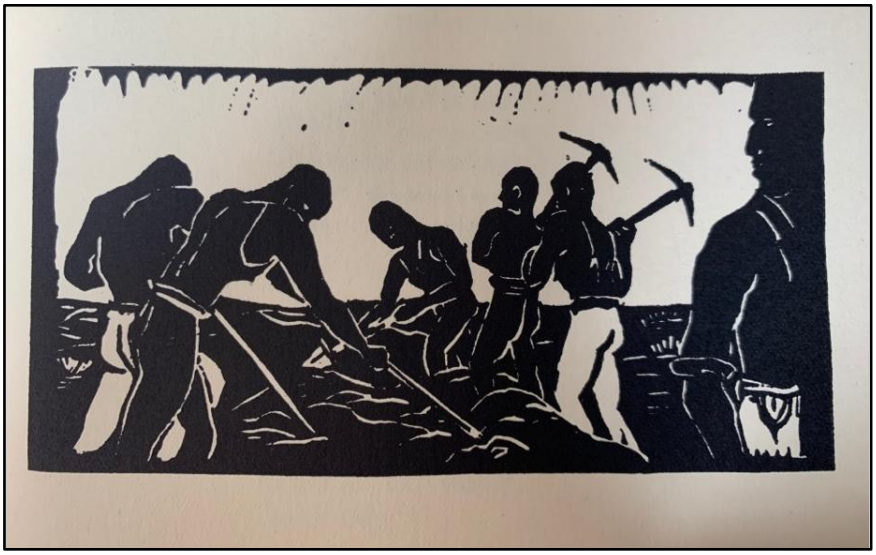


Figure 2: Linoleum cut of a chain gang and guard, by Ina Annett, Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany, edited by B. A Botkin (1930), p. 273.

The five works in *Folk-Say* constituted the son's sexual declaration of independence from his father even as they presupposed the older man's religious faith. The younger Brown drew frank expressions about sexual activity and sexual abuse from folk life and he co-authored an essay with a gay Howard faculty member—all much different from his father's scholarly publications and professional associations. The elder Brown was a minister, reared in the Methodist Episcopal Church, and a professor of religion at Howard from before his son's birth to his own death.

Since I argue below for the influence of the elder Brown on the younger, it is pertinent to note that the sexual themes in the 1930 poems

possibly themselves influenced Toni Morrison, in a notorious episode of sexual abuse in *Beloved* (1987). Morrison studied literature with Brown at Howard in the 1950s, then she was his colleague in the same department in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In *Beloved*, convict laborers are orally raped by guards, in full view of other guards and other convicts (Morrison 107–08). I bookend Brown speculatively—influenced by his father, then, possibly, in turn influencing Toni Morrison—to assert that even if an argument about sexuality and sexual violence in Brown's early poetry is shocking to readers today, Brown situated himself and was later situated by Morrison in a twentieth-century artistic pattern drawn from the lives of the folk, the poor, the abused, and the incarcerated.

The elder Brown was born to an enslaved mother in 1858 in rural Roane County, eastern Tennessee. In his autobiography, he recalled his mother as a faithful Methodist, a lifelong member of "the old church in the South." He himself began exhorting in rural churches as a young man (S. N. Brown, *Life* 8, 12–14). In their earliest phase in North America, Methodists were divided into Calvinist and Arminian camps (McLoughlin 45–97). The famous Methodist evangelist George Whitefield (1714–1770) was Calvinist as was one of the first Black Methodist authors, John Marrant (1755–1791). John Wesley (1703–1791), Charles Wesley (1707–1788), and Francis Asbury (1745–1816) were Arminian. Richard Allen (1760–1831), one of the founders of the African Methodist Episcopal

Church, was probably Calvinist in his young manhood but Arminian once he provided an autobiography (*"Face Zion Forward"* 3–33; Brooks 195–207; Harris). By 1851, Arminianism, or free-will religion, was the more sophisticated option, while Calvinism, or predestinarianism, was more backwards and characteristic of rural areas (McLoughlin 98–140).

The theological persuasion of Brown's childhood church—whether Calvinist or Arminian—is hard to ascertain. It was not an African Methodist Episcopal church, which would have been Arminian by the Civil War era. The first A.M.E. congregation in Tennessee was founded 150 miles away, in Nashville, in 1863, when eight Black worshipers in a mixed-race body with over 500 Black members sought the blessing of A.M.E. bishop Daniel Alexander Payne (1811–1893, consecrated bishop 1852) for a new church (Payne 471–72). It is all but impossible that this small kernel composed of A.M.E. Tennesseeans grew into Roane County during Brown's boyhood. Long distances were impediments to the spread of the hierarchical A.M.E. Church in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and, even in Payne's hometown of Charleston, South Carolina, the A.M.E. congregation dates only from Reconstruction (Saillant, "Before 1822"). For the 1850s and 1860s, "old church" probably meant Calvinist, the religion of the first Black Methodists.

This is important for the younger Brown's early works, in which hardships abound, because Calvinists held tight onto the notion of the

redemptive power of suffering while more liberal forms of Christianity, including Arminianism, were centered on the avoidance of pain. For Calvinists, God forces his chosen ones to suffer so they can, in their trauma, eject their sinful selves and be reborn in his company. For Arminians, God never causes believers to suffer and he understands pain as part of the fallen world, not of his loving and benevolent kingdom. "Southern Road" reflects a Calvinist understanding of pain and suffering that Brown's father would have recognized even if its brutal physicality was not the stuff of sermons.[1]

At Howard, the elder Brown became an influential minister and teacher. He dedicated himself to interpreting European "higher criticism" for African American Christians. He ran correspondence courses for rural ministers to assist them in crafting better sermons more fully representative of both scripture and current hermeneutics. He practiced a regimen of Bible reading at home with his family and he published his own book on the Bible (S. N. Brown, *Life* 40–47; S. N. Brown, *Bible* v–vi, 1–9). He became the leading Black ecumenist of Washington, D.C.,

[1] As late as 1977, Brown's contemporary Robert Hayden (1913–1980) was calling himself a "Calvinist" (Hayden 27).

Minister of the progressive Lincoln Temple Congregational Church and friend of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, whom his son met as a boy (S. A. Brown, "Negro" 68–90; S. A. Brown, "Son's Return" 5). Despite the father's impressive progressive credentials, we can observe, this essay argues, a Calvinist sensibility in the son's early writings—an approach to pain and suffering that he would have received only at home.

The younger Brown first published in 1925, when he was 24 and his father was 67. By the late 1920s, he seems to have been ready to announce a sexual declaration of independence, at least in the arts. The frankness of his poems and essays as well as the freedom of association that led to their composition would likely have shocked his father. Alain Locke (1885–1954), a faculty member at Howard and a gay man, was Brown's co-author in an essay, "Folk Values in a New Medium," an analysis of two films, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1910) and *Hallelujah* (1929). Locke was, in the light of the times, controversially sexualized. By this time, Locke, patron of younger writers of the Harlem Renaissance, was recognized as homosexual in an environment in which his and others' homosexuality was, in Leonard Harris's words, "everyday," "taken for granted," an "open secret" (Harris 321, 325).

A year earlier, in 1928, Brown and Locke had co-written a postcard sent to Langston Hughes, with whom Locke was envisaging a romantic partnership. Brown's contribution, which we can read as a provocation if

not a flirtation, was, “I would love to meet you, Langston” (Stewart 584). In 1934, Locke published a review of *Southern Road*, describing it as an “acme” and writing that Brown’s “poetic divining-rod has dipped significantly over . . . [the] position” where he found “the real treasure trove of the Negro poet.” This was “folk-life,” which Brown, as “above all a bolder and more detached observer, has gone deeper still,” than had earlier Black poets (Locke 88–92). Both Brown and Locke were too adept as wordsmiths to fail to recognize the sexual puns and implications of these comments from the late 1920s and early 1930s.[2] Without, in the second quarter of the twenty-first century, thinking of Brown as gay or bisexual, we can hardly miss the eroticism of the wordplay that Brown and Locke traded.

Brown’s solo essay in the 1930 set, “The Blues as Folk Poetry,” prints lyrics that evoke sex in an earthy way, offering a smorgasbord of profanity.

“I’m fresh from the country, yuh know I’m easy to rule. / Jes hitch me to yo’ cart, girls, and drive me fo’ yo’ mule”; “The gal I love is choklit to de bone”; “Lemme be yo’ switch engine, baby, till de main line comes. / I kin do mo’ switchin’, momma, than yo’ main line ever done” (S. A.

[2] Although Brown’s poems and essays do not address his own sexual life, there is an extensive literature on the sexuality of some of his contemporaries. A good review appears in Holcomb.

Brown, "Blues" 326, 337; see "bone," verb 2, "drive," verb 1, "engine," noun, "mule," noun, and "switch," verb 1, for sexual uses well established before the twentieth century, *Green's Dictionary of Slang*). The polysemism of metaphors like "chocklit to the bone"—the woman is sweet as chocolate inside and out while the man's erect penis is immersed in sweetness during love-making—was an essential strategy Brown adopted from the blues. It would be naïve beyond plausibility to miss the sex in these lyrics. However, a gay friend and the quotation of salty song lyrics were only preambles to Brown's sexual declaration of independence. The substance was the poetry published in *Folk-Say*.

The first of three poems was "Southern Road," which at first glance appears to be the lamentation of a convict laborer. However, it should be read polysemically as a modern-day psalm, a blues, embodying Calvinism in a Black man trapped on a chain gang and suffering the pain and humiliation of a public rape by a white guard. Below I connect the poem to Calvinist themes, much as Brown's own contemporaries regarded Black song as polysemic (Odum 111–47). The first stanza begins, "Swing dat hammer—hunh— / Steady, bo" (lines 1–2). These two lines work as a convict laborer's work song, with the grunt of "hunh" as a cry as the hammer strikes. They also work as a picture of rape. The hammer is the guard's penis and the cry is equally one of pain by the victim of anal rape

and one of pleasure by the rapist as he violates the Black man. (I return to Morrison's *Beloved* below, but it is worth noting here that Paul D listened to the guard's "soft grunts" as the man chained next to him is forced to perform fellatio [Morrison 108].) The noun "hammer" as slang for "penis" originated in the sixteenth century (as did the verb "to hammer" for "to copulate vigorously") and was by the twentieth century, according to lexicographer Jonathon Green, coded as "US black" ("hammer," noun 1, verb 1, *Green's Dictionary of Slang*). "Hammer" is polysemic—tool and phallus. Sinner and (as I argue below) saved are one in divine providence, united in a sexual act, even if forced and painful, even if the guard intends nothing but evil for his victim. Similarly, in Calvinist thought, Satan is ultimately God's instrument. If we read "hammer" one dimensionally as the work implement, we omit the theological significance as well as, of course, its slang meaning as "penis."

The phrase, "Ain't no rush, bebby" (line 5), suggests that the chain gang's workday is long and hard. It also suggests that this is not the first rape. The prisoner is asking the guard to avoid extremes of pain and damage to his body. The significance of the poem's title is now revealed. The "southern road" is not only the highway made by chain gangs but also the Black man's body, again polysemic in that "southern" was slang for genital and anal regions (see "south," adjective 1, *Green's Dictionary of Slang*). Since both theology and the arts operated polysemically, the

roads—the black asphalt laid over broken rocks and the Black man's body penetrated by the white man—are one. The second stanza states the modern version of original sin and the Fall. The speaker has killed a man and fallen into the chain gang, condemned for "life, bebby, / An' a day" (lines 11–12). It is the nature of "life" and "a day," along with the way they are "Got," that becomes (as I argue below) the final concern of the poem.

Stanzas three and four recount his humiliation, as a man, sinner, and criminal. His daughter has become a prostitute, though we must here remember Mary Magdalen. His son has disappeared into parts unknown, though we must here remember the prodigal son. His father has cursed him and died, while his mother is alone and poor without the speaker's succor. We must here remember the biblical curses from which God's chosen people recovered as well as women left alone, temporarily, such as Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha, and Jesus's mother, Mary. The speaker's honor has vanished, through his own fault. Stanza five deepens the humiliation, for he is still chained to another convict and the guard is immediately behind him. The rapist acts in public without shame, dishonoring his victim in full sight of other men. Ina Annett's linoleum cut placed two pages before the poem confirms that the guard watches the men in a scene that seems to be sexualized. The guard's eye regards five men, one of whose buttocks is outlined visibly. In our relatively sanitized

time in the second quarter of the twenty-first century, sexual abuse in incarceration does not come readily to mind, but in the 1930 *Folk-Say* it was, I suggest, easily implied in an illustration.

The sixth stanza resolves the problems of the poem by using a religious term: "White man tells me—hunh— / Damn yo' soul" (lines 31–32). This is the turning point for the convert, who now knows he deserves damnation: "Got no need, bebby, / To be tole" (lines 35–36). The last stanza opens the possibility of salvation: "Po' los' boy, bebby, / Evahmo' . . ." (lines 41–42).

"Lost" is the keyword here, incorporating several centuries of Reformed Christian conversionism. What is lost in the Bible is found according to God's providence. The sinful self must be lost before the sanctified self is won. The irony of the imprisonment, which will "nevah" release him (line 37), is that God will free him regardless of his human captors' intentions, no matter the pain to which the rapist condemns him, no matter the Hell to which white people consign him. Irony was built into Calvinism insofar as God overrules sin for his own purposes. The sinner in the process of conversion is ready to be found by God. When the prisoner knows he is lost, he is, at last, ready to be found. Darieck Scott, writing of *Beloved*'s Paul D, captures this loss that follows the rape, in a secular manner, without Brown's theological implications. Scott writes that "what happens seems to threaten total loss of self: the vertigo that

contemplates death, the cessation of the ego of the subject" (103). Theologically, the day of "life, bebby, / An' a day" is the new day given to this man by the Christ child—this is Brown's polysemism in action. "Bebby" is Christ superordinating over the guard and overruling his evil intentions. The initial reading of "life" and "a day" is a life sentence in prison, with hard labor, yet the deeper reading is eternal life, given by God after, in Calvinist logic, pain, humiliation, and the abandonment of the sinning self.

The word "Got" introduces one of the fundamental problems of enslavement and oppression, the will of the enslaved and its consonance with divine will. Both James H. Cone and Albert Murray offered pertinent ideas about the will. Cone wrote that God's "will was the liberation of the oppressed" (66). Murray wrote that in the blues we hear the "will to persevere" (10). As the poem is progressing, the speaker moves to the verge of the knowledge that the life he has "Got" is the life God will give him. In getting it, he comes to fulfill both God's and his own will, though he seems not to understand this yet.

In the person of a Black man, a sinner and then a sufferer of rape and humiliation, Brown embodied the essence of conversion as understood by American Calvinists. The sin, the fall, the pain, the humiliation, the acceptance of a deserved damnation, all must precede conversion and salvation. Among evangelical Calvinists, the pain was often understood to

be spiritual even if it manifested itself physically. Brown took this element of Calvinist theology and turned it Black, embedding it in Black pain. While the sexual violence was horrific, the theology was informed and traditional. The sinner necessarily passes through pain to come unto salvation. Additionally, Brown's use of Calvinism in "Southern Road" reflected, perhaps, his father's interactions with rural preachers. At Howard, the elder Brown was a sophisticated intellectual, yet he offered correspondence courses to unschooled ministers who were seeking to improve their sermons. Surely some of those men, whether rural or urban, knew about the history of abuse of enslaved Black men (Foster 85–112; Staidum 63–107). The younger Brown mirrored his father's relationships,

The second of the three poems was "Ma Rainey," named for a singer known in the 1920s as a lesbian (Hammer). Brown implies that homosexuality is not alien to the lives of poor Black people, that the ability to respond to shared pain is more important than normative sexuality. The occasion of the "hard luck" in the poem is a flood, a phenomenon well known to any Bible reader (see "flood," verb 2, for a later, "US black" sexual use, *Green's Dictionary of Slang*). The name "Ma Rainey" evokes the rains, merging the pain and the cure, the storm and the song, polysemically, just as the hammer in "Southern Road" has two meanings:

O Ma Rainey,

Sing yo' song;

Now you's back

Whah you belong,

Git way inside us,

Keep us strong . . . .

O Ma Rainey,

Li'l an' low,

Sing us 'bout de hard luck

Roun' our do';

Sing us 'bout de lonesome road

We mus' go . . . . (lines 19–30)

Sexuality in "Ma Rainey" is emotional, not physical, insofar as in the poem there seems to be nothing that can be read as symbolic of sexual activity. The poem concerns the emotions of a community reacting to crisis, not the trial of an individual man. However, the third poem, "Dark of the Moon," returns to language evocative of the Bible as well as of individual sexual activity. "Moon" has been, since the eighteenth century, slang for "anus" and "buttocks" ("moon," noun 1, *Green's Dictionary of Slang*). There seem to be a man's unnamed sin (possibly incest), his sexual activity (planting a fence post), and his biblically-inflected son (Joseph). Incest requires, of course, two participants. In the poem the

wife and mother (and possibly also sister or even daughter, hence the incest) dies fast so the focus shifts to the sin of the husband and father. I argue for the poem's shocking content, yet, of course, nothing about either Brown's sexuality activity is implied. This is the place to remind ourselves that William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, in which two characters have been incestuous, was published in 1929, one year before "Dark of the Moon."

The poem opens with a superstition about the unwisdom of planting a fence post during "de dark uh de moon" (line 2). To do so is pointless, since it will rot. In the second stanza, the poem implies that the farmer, "Dad," conceived his son, "Joseph," unwisely (line 10). The lack of wisdom is never specified, yet it is, arguably, implied to be incest. The post planted, wrongly, in the dark is sexually symbolic. The mother died young and the father transferred his affection to Joseph: "Dad took to Joseph, / All dat he had to / Keep his heart warm; / Nuffin' but Joseph, / Smart an' good-lookin'" (lines 10–14; see "toches" and tooky," noun, for sexual uses, *Green's Dictionary of Slang*). Joseph in the poem surely echoes the Joseph of Genesis, Jacob's favorite son, well known in African American literature (Richards, "Joseph"). Turning against his father, Brown's Joseph went bad, longing for "fancy gals" (line 22) and becoming a drunk. Joseph was in town inebriated when his father died, he skipped the funeral, and he let the farm go to auction. The biblical Joseph,

by contrast, resisted the "fancy" wife of Potiphar (Genesis 39: 5–20) and secured land for his family (Genesis 45: 9–10). If incest was the original sin committed by the mother and the father, then repeated in the father's inordinate affection for the son, and possibly even through abuse of the boy, the son's alienation from his father and abandonment of the family farm were the issues of such sin. As in "Southern Road," Calvinist themes are predominant: the downfall and rot of the family are preordained and the figure of Joseph is, in Genesis, an example of the predestination of human affairs. Here the father's sin stains everything in the family and farm.

If the interpretations of these five works from *Folk-Say* are reasonable, several conclusions can be drawn. One is that the younger Brown was imitating the elder's connection to the folk. The elder Brown engaged the most current hermeneutics, but he tutored unschooled rural preachers. The younger Brown taught college literature, yet he created folk characters in his own artistic works. Washington, D.C. was an ideal environment in the late 1920s for two Black men to pursue these twin goals. Another is that the younger Brown maintained the major premises of his father's theological inheritance—that God brings his elect to him through forms of suffering that incite them to abandon their sinful selves and that God foreordains events in the lives of humankind. A third is that the content of Brown's early works—ranging from a gay co-author, to

earthy blues lyrics, to male-on-male rape, to an audience's love for a lesbian singer, to an incestuous family—summed to a sexual declaration of independence from his father, for surely hardly any father, Christian minister or not, readily imagines his son's writing about such matters. Indeed, when Brown published the book *Southern Road*, he dedicated it to his mother, omitting his father (S. A. Brown, *Southern Road* v). None of these three conclusions can be readily drawn through a consideration of the poem "Southern Road" by itself. They all seem reasonable, I argue, if we examine Brown's five 1930 works as a unity.

I draw an additional conclusion here about college and university instruction. Brown's poem "Southern Road," like his other works, is today taught almost exclusively with anthologies. Such volumes for classroom use carry costs and benefits. In Brown's case, the costs seem too high to bear. The meaning of the poem seems to change as we extract it from its original context. One change occurred with the publication of the book *Southern Road*, then another, much more drastic, occurred with the appearance of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*.[3]

[3] The first edition was *Norton* 1997 with "Southern Road," 1213–14. The notes emphasize the grunt as the sound of a laborer on a chain gang and "life" as life imprisonment, in other words, the one-dimensional interpretation against which I have been arguing here. The fourth edition, containing the same notes, is *Norton* 2025, vol 1, 1309–10. I describe the problem of over-reliance on *Norton* in Saillant, "Black Atlantic."

The religiosity and the sexuality of the poem, out of its context, are absent from the anthology, if not unthinkable. Without disparaging the knowledge and the convenience that anthologies represent, it seems clear that classroom readings, including those readily available on the internet, allow for contextualization of Brown's early writings.

Beloved, however, deserves the last word here. In addition to Morrison's epigraph from Romans 9:25, the Bible contains many instances of the word "beloved," so we must think of a scriptural source for Sethe's daughter as we have for figures in Brown's 1930 poems. The sacrifice of one's child has, of course, biblical resonance. Without broaching the Calvinist notion of suffering as the necessary path to salvation, Morrison depicts characters who settle in their own way with the pain and terror of their lives. Having observed the rape of convict laborers much like the one alluded to in "Southern Road" as well as having suffered sexual abuse himself by Beloved, Paul D moves into love and sustenance for Sethe. Sethe is on the verge of caring for herself as she once cared for Beloved, implying that she is coming to grips with the sacrifice she made and the terror through which she lived. In "Southern Road" the character has not yet understood God's role in his life, while in *Beloved* Sethe and Paul D share an epiphany. The difference between "Southern Road" and *Beloved* is that in the poem Brown as author perceives an end that the speaker has not yet, while in the novel's

conclusion the characters see a flash of their shared renewal, which Morrison as author shares more directly with her readers as well as with her characters. Brown holds back while Morrison reveals.

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Between Branches

Jake Dennis

I wake to write and my sick wife
comes to me, like a cat
to be let out. *My chest* …,
she repeats, knowing all I can do
is hold her. Still, I remember Plath's figs:

the partner I am, the touring performer I could
have been, the poet I stretch to become … all that is
left of my life, and my wife, her eyelids
warm as logans, her thumbs as light, her call
urgent as paws on windows. Under the sun

how little time we have to enjoy
the choices we take. Remember
the heartbeat beneath your hands, that delicate rattle
of breath as they are heavy sweetness
falling from our trees to be carried.

Beyond Heroic Male Nationalism: Women and Alternative Communal Resistance in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*

Chimi Woo

Postcolonial scholarship has shown that the history of the transition from colonial to postcolonial regimes was deeply problematic, revealing that the promise of decolonization was often realized through the marginalization of social groups such as peasants and women, who were expected to share in the outcomes of national emancipation. One example that demonstrates the unexpected crisis of decolonization is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's novel *A Grain of Wheat*. Published in 1967, the novel portrays the Kenyan people's struggle for independence from British rule during the turbulent years of the Mau Mau resistance (1952 – 1960) and the nation's independence from Britain in 1963. The novel begins with two epigraphs, and one of them is Ngũgĩ's authorial note: "the situation and the problems are real – sometimes too painfully real for the peasants who fought the British yet who now see all that they fought for being put on one side."[1]

[1] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*. Rev. ed., Heinemann, 1986. This authorial note is on an unnumbered page before page 1. All subsequent references to the novel are taken from this edition.

As Simon Gikandi explains, this epigraph draws critical attention to the crisis of decolonization that is dramatized in Ngũgĩ's novel as "an acute opposition between the expectations raised by nationalism and the realities of compromised decolonization" (98-99). In addition to its attention to the disillusionment of decolonization, the novel complicates heroic anti-colonial narratives by exposing the fragmented lives of the Thabai villagers under British rule through their collective trauma, betrayal, and reconciliation, with a focus on Mumbi's relationships with Gikonyo, Karanja, Kihika, and Mugo.

Scholars have critiqued the gendered dynamics of nationalism, noting how women serve as passive, symbolic icons of the nation. Nations are often conceptualized in familial terms where "[w]omen are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, but are denied any direct relation to national agency," as Anne McClintock argues (62). This paper examines women's roles during the Mau Mau movement and the decolonization of Kenya in Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat*. It argues that while women's national significance in the novel partly lies in their traditional roles as mothers and defenders of national values, the novel rejects the framework that confines women to the inner domestic domain.

Instead, women emerge not only as political leaders during the years of the Movement, but also as an alternative force for communal unity and healing amid the trauma of the colonial past and uncertainties over the

nation's postcolonial future, while the heroic models of male leadership fail to establish transcendent authority for all community members.[2] Critics have examined women's positions within nationalist movements. Kumari Jayawardena's critique of the political history of anti-colonial nationalism in Asian countries emphasizes that nationalist struggles were mainly men's history:

> In the period of nationalist struggles, men were the main movers of history. They organized nationalist movements and political parties, set the parameters for the struggle, and even determined the role that women should play. In this sense, with a few exceptions, the women worked within the boundaries laid down by men. The history uncovered in this way is a 'contributive' history. (260-61)

While Partha Chatterjee acknowledges the limits of this "contributive role" of serving the nationalist goals defined by men, he contends that Jayawardena's argument is a product of examining conventional political archives. Chatterjee argues that "women also took an active part in nationalist struggle" (137), a history preserved not in political documents, but in archives such as women's autobiographies.

[2] Homi Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* emphasizes the complex reality of the nation's people, arguing that the "liminal figure of the nation-space would ensure that no political ideologies could claim transcendent or metaphysical authority for themselves" (299).

In order to show the role of women in nationalist struggle, Chatterjee maps a spatial dichotomy of home and world, which resolves the paradoxes of Indian nationalism. Indian nationalists realized that adopting the very Western and modern idea of the nation-state would be to concede superiority to the colonizer, while the nation was a powerful framework for self-assertion. Chatterjee argues that the resolution of this paradox took the form of a separation of the private and the public, the inner and the outer, the spiritual and the material, by turning to women's personal memoirs and autobiographies to find voices that are suppressed in political history. Chatterjee's lens helps us to see a dynamic and dialectical relationship between women and communal life in Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat*. Rather than adhering to the spatial divisions, the women of Thabai cross boundaries, not as assertions of autonomous subjectivity but as participants in historical processes of change during the years of the Mau Mau movement.

A Grain of Wheat attempts to assemble "the fragments of a national life," to "prove national consciousness, with multiple, myriad components that display an active communal life" (Brennan 61). Rather than presenting the colonized community as being unified, the novel emphasizes communal fragmentation and individual frailty over unity. The novel illustrates how colonial pressure forced some villagers to prioritize personal survival over nationalist ideals by portraying the Thabai

people's resistance, betrayal, and collaboration. However, central to these dynamic components, women actively participate in the historical process of change, shaping and sustaining various facets of communal life. Thabai women challenge their traditional roles and assume leadership roles. The novel illustrates this shift through Wambui's directorial role during the 1950 workers' strike, which was designed to paralyze colonial governance:

> The strike was meant to paralyse the country and make it more difficult for the whiteman to govern. . . . At the height of the proceedings, Wambui suddenly broke through the crowd and led a group of women to the platform. She grabbed the microphone from the speakers. . . Was there any circumcised man who felt water in the stomach at the sight of a whiteman? Women, she said, had brought their Mithuru and Miengu to the platform. . . . The next day all men stayed away from work. (180)

This scene powerfully portrays how women challenged and directed political and economic resistance. As the narrator notes, Wambui believed in "the power of women to influence events, especially where men had failed to act, or seemed indecisive" (180). Wambui also participated in the Mau Mau Movement by delivering messages and weapons to the male freedom fighters. In the chapter titled "Warui, Wambui," Ngugi describes Wambui as embodying an "aged wisdom," whose eyes "see beyond the

drizzle and the mist," toward "the fields to dig and cultivate ready for the next season" (242). Amid the grief and disillusionment following Mugo's public confession of his betrayal of Kihika during the independence celebration, Wambui guides the community through their shared trauma toward "the next season" of a postcolonial future.

A Grain of Wheat, however, shows how the inner domain of home is also affected by the conditions of colonization, which distort the relations the colonized maintain with their own culture. British colonialism, represented by the image of "a powerful woman [sitting] on a throne" (10), alters the way the Thabai people view female rule that they had in the past. Their resentment of the colonial rule by the British Queen is projected onto their own history, reframing their ancient matriarchal rule as tyranny:

> Nevertheless, his words about a woman on the throne echoed something in the heart, deep down in their history. It was a man, many years ago. Then women ruled the land of the Agikuyu. Men had no property, they were only there to serve the whims and needs of the women. (10-11)

The novel also tells the story of an ancient female Gikuyu ruler who was dethroned after a public, naked dance, which casts female sovereignty as an oppressive, dark power. This trope of female misrule recurs in the contemporary setting of the village of Thabai. For example, the men of

Thabai mock women for doing manual labor: “Men, finding women like Mumbi on the roof hammering in the nails, stopped to tease them: it was all because a woman—a new Wangu—in England—had been crowned: what good ever came from a woman’s rule?” (141). The cynical question reflects how Thabai men project their hatred of British imperial rule, represented by a queen on a throne, onto their own female rule. This demonstrates how colonial domination can hamper a culture’s capacity to evaluate its values.

Ngũgĩ depicts the Thabai women, though in varying degrees, as alternative voices to the problematized male leadership. Women bridge the community fractured under British rule and divided by the imposed vision of male leadership. Kihika’s vision of a new and independent Kenya is colored by his reading and revolutionary interpretation of the Bible, and shares the messianism of European nationalism.[3] Kihika’s vision fails to claim authority over some villagers, such as Mugo, and becomes a reason for Mugo’s betrayal of Kihika. Ngũgĩ emphasizes Mugo’s social isolation and his fear of being caught as the reasons for betraying Kihika, resulting from the breakdown of traditional communal structures under colonialism (Maughan-Brown 248).

[3] Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* notes that “If the nationalist imagining is so concerned, this suggests a strong affinity with religious imaginings” (10).

After killing the District Officer Robson, Kihika visits Mugo to distract the homeguard and the Police from the forests where forest fighters stayed, and also to ask Mugo to lead an underground movement. However, Kihika looks like a madman to Mugo, being blinded by his obsession with the Movement: "He spoke without raising his voice, almost unaware of Mugo, or of his danger, like a man possessed. . . . Each word confirmed Mugo's suspicion that the man was mad" (191). Kihika's visit to Mugo's hut and his words only terrify Mugo: "Mugo sat rigidly in his seat, staring at Kihika was mad, mad, he reflected, and the thought only increased his terror" (192). Mugo's fear intensifies because his connection to Kihika would lead to his execution. Mugo resents that Kihika tried to pull him into the Movement and danger: "Why should Kihika drag me into a struggle and problems I have not created? Why?" (194). Driven by terror, Mugo informs District Officer Robson of Kihika's whereabouts, and Kihika is arrested and strangled to death.

While Kihika imposes his vision on Mugo, leading to his betrayal, Mumbi awakens Mugo to his moral responsibility by sharing her story of failure. Kihika asks Mugo to join the Movement, but Mumbi asks about his dream by explaining what she means by dream:

> I don't mean ordinary dreams at night when you are asleep. It is when you are young in a clear day and you look into the future and

you see great things. Your heart beats inside because you want the days to come quickly. Then Life's sorrow cannot touch you. (136)

Mumbi shares how her dream of domestic happiness with her husband, Gikonyo, was shattered during the Emergency. In particular, she shares the crisis that arose in her life while Gikonyo was in detention. Upon the unexpected news of Gikonyo's release from detention, Mumbi succumbs to Karanja, overjoyed at Gikonyo's return, but, at the same time, profoundly exhausted. Mumbi herself depicts the moment to Mugo: "What else is there to tell you? That I remember being full of submissive gratitude? That I laughed—even welcomed Karanja's cold lips on my face? I was in a strange world, and it was like if I was mad" (150). Mumbi's story of failure moves Mugo out of his isolation, like being "at the bottom of the pool" (150), to look at "life, struggle, even amidst pain and blood and poverty" that seem "beautiful" (151). Kihika's eloquent words of passionate idealism only terrify Mugo, making him feel overwhelmed and inadequate for Kihika's demand: "[Kihika] had people who would mourn his end, who would name their children after him, so that Kihika's name would never die from men's lips. Kihika had everything; Mugo had nothing" (195). In contrast, Mumbi's open-hearted story of their shared vulnerability breaks Mugo's isolation and silence. Her trust awakens him to moral responsibility to confess the truth to the community whose leaders intend to expose publicly and execute Kihika's

betrayer on Independence Day. Mugo's courage and confession, in turn, shatters Gikonyo's bitter resentment toward Mumbi to confront his own confession of the oath in the detention camps: "What difference was there between him and Karanja or Mugo or those who had openly betrayed people and worked with the whiteman to save themselves?" (245). Gikonyo admires that "Mugo had the courage to face his guilt and lose everything" (245), which humbles him to be ready to rebuild their marriage.[4]

The novel shows that Mumbi's surrender to Karanja does not diminish her fidelity to Gikonyo,[5] which is underscored by her sharp contrast with Margery Thompson. Margery's affair with Dr. Van Dyke is driven by self-indulgent thrill: "Margery was suffused with new energy; the secrecy, the daring, the anarchic joy of breaking a law, sharpened the excitement of their affair" (50). This contrast further exposes the internal contradictions of the colonial settlers' ideology and their claim to cultural superiority. The novel portrays British colonizers' ideology and their claims to superiority.

[4] Gikandi notes that "while Gikonyo and Mumbi can confront their individual failings and hence imagine a new associative relationship, they can do so because even in their moments of weakness and betrayal they still operated within the parameters defined by a collective good" (125-26).

[5] Kritish Rajbhandari notes about Mumbi's "betrayal": "Her resistance against the colonial force is mirrored in her repudiation of Karanja's sexual advances. The nation's anticolonial struggle is narrativized in her fidelity to her marriage, as her body is recoded as the embodiment of the nation-to-come" (172).

For example, the conversation between Margery Thompson and Karanja highlights the British colonial prejudice. Margery's question exposes that she perceives the African custom of polygamy as inherently backward: "'How many wives have you?' she asked. This was her favorite question for Africans; it began the day she discovered her latest cook had three wives. Karanja started as if Margery had tickled a wound that had only healed at the surface" (38). John Thompson advocates a "civilizing mission" based on "the principle of Reason, of Order and of Measure" (53), believing that the English attitude of mind can transform people in Africa:

> In [*Prospero in Africa*] he argued that to be English was basically an attitude of mind: it was a way of looking at life, at human relationship, at the just ordering of human society. Was it not possible to reorientate people into this way of life by altering their social and cultural environment? (54)

However, the novel exposes the internal failure of the colonial settlers' ideology and their claimed superiority. Margery's affair with Dr. Van Dyke illustrates the moral collapse of British civilization from within. Margery is a British woman expected to embody the claimed ideal of civilized Britishness, but her story shows that the civilizing principles fail to guide her, undermining the claims of cultural superiority over the African community.

While the moral failure of the settler family dismantles the myth of white superiority, the novel also interrogates the myth of the male nationalism. The rhetoric of male leadership assumes men as "the main movers of history" of the anti-colonial movement, as Jayawardena notes (126). However, the real relationship between male leadership and the anti-colonial movement has lost its earlier prominence and has become more complex and ironic. The novel's second chapter traces the development of the Movement, focusing on the historical figures Waiyaki, Harry Thuku, and Kenyatta. It also depicts Kihika as "a son of the land" "marked out as one of the heroes of deliverance" (14) by recounting his triumph, especially his raid on the Mahee police post. In this depiction of male national leaders, the nation is represented as the domain of men because it has largely been constructed based on masculinized memory and hope. However, heroic male leadership proves unstable and problematic in the novel. Later in the novel, the collapse of the male leadership becomes one of the most agonizing realities for the detainees in the detention camps to confront:

> Each detainee slunk into his bed on the floor. In the day they avoided talking about Jomo or speculating about the outcome of the case in Kapenguria. They refused to look into one another's eyes in order not to read what the other was thinking. Long ago, Young Harry had also been detained, and sentenced to live alone on an island in the Indian

> Ocean for seven years. He had come back a broken man, who promised eternal co-operation with his oppressors, denouncing the Party he had helped to build. What happened yesterday could happen today. The same thing, over and over again, through history. (106)

Harry Thuku was a legendary, heroic leader of early anti-colonial resistance, but he returned from exile "a broken man" who cooperated with his oppressors. By recalling this history and linking it to Jomo Kenyatta, the contemporary messianic figure of Kenyan nationalism, the detainees fear that Kenyatta's trial at Kapenguria will end in defeat, repeating a history of broken promises. Through these anxieties, Ngũgĩ exposes the limits and vulnerability of male heroic leadership, which is also dramatized through Mugo's betrayal of Kihika. Mugo's public confession of his betrayal on Independence Day ruptures the heroic narrative that the community seeks to celebrate independence. Mugo's betrayal and confession complicates the nation's effort to "turn the contested meaning of the colonial past into a 'charter' on which postcolonial identities can be constructed" (Gikandi 115), forcing the Thabai villagers to confront and embrace their shared trauma, guilt, and compromise during the Emergency years.

Karanja represents another dimension of failed male leadership through his collaboration with the British colonizers. By joining the Home Guard, he alienates himself from his community. This separation of

Karanja from his people is contrasted with the moral wisdom preserved by women, as expressed in his mother's warning: "Don't go against the people. A man who ignores the voice of his own people comes to no good end" (226). This wisdom that the Thabai women preserve and hand down to the next generation clearly views that collaboration leads to "no good end," as the novel shows. The chapter "Karanja" depicts "the hooded self" (231) of Karanja, who picked out those involved in Mau Mau, only to delve into lonely darkness: "the silence around him deepened; the night seemed to have grown darker" (231). As Simon Gikandi interprets, Karanja has become "a hooded self without any history or affiliation" because his "betrayal is premised on an absolute disregard and contempt of collective norms and desires" (126). While Karanja represents the ultimate loss of history and affiliation through betrayal, women such as Wambui and Mumbi embody historical continuity and communal reconstruction.

On the day of the independence celebrations, the novel depicts the community's uncertainty about the nation's future, using a collective narrative voice of "we":

> We sang song after song about Kihika and Mugo. A calm holiness united our hearts. Like those who had come from afar to see Mugo do miracles or even speak to God, we all vaguely expected that something extraordinary would happen. It was not exactly a happy feeling; it was

more a disturbing sense of an inevitable doom. (217)

The village people expect Mugo to play a heroic role in unifying the village and healing its divisions, unaware yet of his betrayal of Kihika. Ngũgĩ emphasizes that to achieve true independence, the community must confront its guilt and trauma, such as Mugo's betrayal, Gikonyo's confession of the oath, and Karanja's collaboration. The sense of doom also comes from a compromised independence, as Gikonyo learns that the newly empowered local Member of Parliament has already used his political power to purchase the land the peasants fought for.

The novel offers a vision of communal unity in its final pages. The hope for community healing and a true postcolonial beginning is epitomized in the final chapter, "Harambee," through the domestic reconciliation of Gikonyo and Mumbi.[6] Their union is symbolized by Gikonyo's planned gift for Mumbi, a stool that he envisions to make out of "a Muiri stem, a hardwood that grew around Kerinyaga" (244), the nation's sacred, legendary mountain.

[6] Patrick Williams in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* notes that "The complex process of overcoming division and rebuilding the community is embodied in the highly symbolic couple of Gikonyo and Mumbi" (74).

He plans to carve "three legs curved into three grim-faced figures, sweating under a weight" (244), representing the communal trauma and burden of the colonial past. Reconsidering his plan, Gikonyo changes the figures to depict a man and a woman holding hands, with a child between them, illustrating his willingness to accept Mumbi's child fathered by Karanja. Gikonyo finally envisions, "I'll change the woman's figure. I shall carve a woman big – big with child" (247), representing a hope for the future of the newly independent nation.[7] The stool with the pregnant woman honors "Mumbi's role as the mother of the nation" (Gikandi 125) and as the emotional and moral center of the novel. Where the heroic male leadership fractures, Mumbi emerges as an alternative force for communal healing, not through heroism, but through everyday endurance and shared vulnerability. Women's participation in the dynamic process of historical change, therefore, provides a crucial alternative when masculinized nationalism has faltered.

[7] Neil Lazarus in "(Re)turn to the People: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Crisis of Postcolonial African Intellectualism" notes that "the novel leaves the reader with an image of hope, embodied . . . in Gikonyo's carving of a stool in the shape of a pregnant woman . . ." (22).

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It Take English & a small-lettered god to come out of a Debt

Nnadi Samuel

I hunt the Food Lion mall with a street map.
the wide jaw of the scroll bar on my phone—open to a kind of yawning
when the Wi-Fi cones into a poor signal & seizes network.

a stain amid familiar bricks; I am once again at the mercy of language. I
used to imagine myself a native speaker, fluent with asking.
unknown to me, I am only a blunder away from being a type of mischief
English tolerates.

as migrants, we purchase in ways that defy currency. so, I buy into a white
lie: assure myself my spit is harmless & incapable of inciting a gloved
passer-by.

I reckon Virginia is one state that hides history & do a clean job at it—
the way the roads caves in on the inside and keeps bowing down to
numbers you'd forget. a file of snow keeping records on the sidewalk,
punctual at its job when it shows up in winter.

I work my hand into a cursor, thirsting for direction. when the search
button pops up on my device,
I resume typing a *scriptio continua* that begs for breathing space. letters,
close marking themselves, as I stomp my way into a dead end.

my long legs, roaming better than a cell phone outside of its registered
address. it will take a search party to sniff me out of the tunnel I share
signal with.

the coal boiling on the rooftop is a hotspot, if looked at from a dangerous
distance. but I forget it provides heat.

yet, everyone is four degrees Celsius from being ice: *fridge in human skin,*
before a melting kissed by sunlight; gorgeous in the wet.

we flood back to the road in a bold deluge, in car honking spirit. our nostrils, processing the thick smoke as oxygen.

I commute with my legs, refusing the public transport
that would have me inhaling black soot all through the ride to save my eardrums the heresy of teenagers arguing that the levain croissant is better than Food Lion's.

the relish scrapes the flavor of home from my tongue.
I must stink of a sellout, purchased by two shekels of coins [$].
once, I thought my survival outside of my country is something beyond a snack. now, I want to eat my dough & still have it, rolled & battered up to a folded sign.

put a chef on my name, will you.
or do I bleed on apron, before I turn what swallows a bakery whole?

I rise like yeast above the glass shelves, peering at the pastry—oven fresh from heat. the design feels numb when touched,
like a sighing shape /ʃ/ molded by someone who fails to differentiate between a *currency* & a *curse.*

the long line that crosshatches a dollar sign is clear as a stain, but people still fail at these things.

Critiquing Intellectual Freedom in Critical Pedagogy through Jennine Capó Crucet's *Make Your Home Among Strangers*

Suchismita Dutta



Figure 1. Students at Georgia Southern University burn Capó Crucet's book. Source Twitter.

On October 9, 2019, author Jennine Capó Crucet was invited to give a talk at Georgia Southern University's Statesboro Campus on diversity and white privilege. Her lecture, inspired by her own struggles, was centered around her novel *Make Your Home Among Strangers* that portrays the story of a Cuban American girl struggling to fit into a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). An Associate Professor in the Department of

English and the Institute for Ethnic Studies at the University of Nebraska, Capó Crucet discussed her book with an audience of freshmen students as a part of the school's "First Year Experience" reading selection. Capó Crucet, a first-generation scholar, shared her own encounters with racism, her family's immigration status, and her constant negotiation with the question, "But where are you from *from*?" During the question-and-answer session, one student challenged Capó Crucet, "What makes you believe that it's OK to come to a college campus, like this, when we are supposed to be promoting diversity on this campus, which is what we're taught . . . I don't understand what the purpose of this [Crucet's talk] was" (qtd. in Horton). Capó Crucet clarified at her talk that "none of us is the one story" and that readers, especially college students, must refrain from the dangers of assuming that this one novel is the collective narrative of all Latin American students (qtd. in Bliss).[1] However, by the end of her talk a group of students had gathered outside campus where a garishly ceremonious book-burning (see Figure 1) had begun to protest Capó Crucet's talk.[2]

[1] See "Latina author whose whole book was burned by students appears at Nashville's Southern Festival of Books" by Jessica Bliss, *The Tennessean,* October 13, 2019.

[2] See "Students Burn Book after Talk on White Privilege by Hispanic Author" by Alex Horton, *Independent,* UK, October 12, 2019.

Captured by phone cameras and broadcast on social media, the image of students ripping out pages from Capó Crucet's book and setting them on fire unsettled many in higher education.

This essay investigates a shift in the way Critical University Studies makes its presence felt in the larger evolving domain of intellectual freedom in critical pedagogy. Originating primarily at the intersections of Cultural Studies and Critical Pedagogy, Critical University Studies paves avenues for scholars to "interrogate structures of higher education and their entanglements with national and global institutions and political movements" (Singh and Vora 39). The book-burning tied to Capó Crucet's talk at Georgia Southern University raises complex questions about academic freedom and the forms of censorship that are inflicted upon educators by their institution's various constituencies.

Even more concerning is the manner in which several mainstream media outlets reported on the event. Even though their general condemnation was apparent, well-known print media organizations chose to publish symbolic Getty images or freely available stock photos (see Figures 3-4) instead of further circulating the actual images of a group of students reveling in the light of the fire that destroyed copies of Capó Crucet's *Make Your Home Among Strangers.* This style of selective journalism is worrisome considering that Georgia Southern University refused to condemn the book-burning, dismissing the controversy by

stating that their students have a right to burn books if they choose, adding only that book burning does not "encourage the civil discourse and debate of ideas" (qtd. in Beckett). The university's student newspaper enthusiastically reported that Capó Crucet was criticized for "dissing white people" and for her "ignorance and racism towards white people" (Beckett).



Figure 3. Stock image used by independent.co.uk to report on the event.

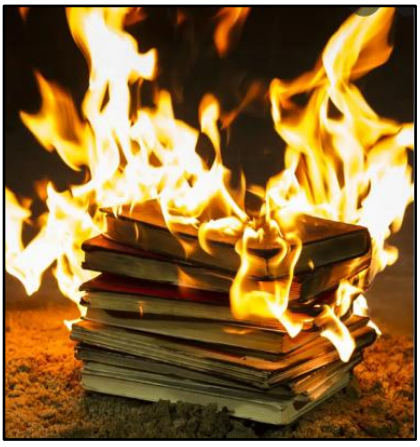


Figure 4. Stock image used by Higher Ed to report on the event.

One can trace discourse surrounding this book-burning ceremony to Rinaldo Walcott's argument that multiculturalism is dead.[3]

Walcott explains this demise by reasoning that multiculturalism often acts as an ideological distraction from the real sources of discrimination rather than being a solution for anti-racism. Hence, the physical destruction of copies of Capó Crucet's book can be invoked as a symbolic death of diversity and multiculturalism in the American academy. Of course, the danger of accepting the demise of multiculturalism is that it allows "for a moving away from the narratives of threat, fear, and danger that have become dominant in our post-colonial times" (Walcott 41). In other words, accepting the death of multiculturalism restrains any future understanding of the experiences of historically colonized people and their narratives of threat, fear, and danger. This becomes even more apparent as one undertakes a comparative study of the protagonist of *Make Your Home Among Strangers*, Lizet Ramirez, and the book-burning incident that occurred after the author's talk at Georgia Southern University.

[3] Acknowledging the failure of 'multiculturalism', a term that Stuart Hall discusses as "particular discourses or social forms which incorporate marked cultural differences and diverse ethnicities" (*Un/settled Multiculturalism* 2), Walcott renames the afterlife of this changing and ongoing cultural diversity work as "popular multiculturalism" or "the multiculturalism that occurs from below, driven by the intimacies of urban life" (49).

Consistent with the framework of Walcott's theory, there are two sub-categories of "bad" multiculturalism that prohibit the ethnic Other from making a home in the institutions of whiteness that they inhabit. By analyzing the idea of "white anxieties" and "diasporic heirlooms" in Capó Crucet's writing, this essay expands on Walcott's theory on the logical end of multiculturalism that focuses on the contested multicultural spaces like the school campus or the metropolitan city where the former colonizer and the colonized occupy the same geopolitical space today.[4]

By engaging in a symbolic reading of the book-burning episode, we are compelled to investigate the theoretical and practical reasons for such anti-minority hatred in an academic setting. For a better understanding of the cause and effect of this violent event, Walcott's definition of "white anxieties," which seems to be the root cause of such strong support for white supremacy at a college campus, comes in handy. Walcott writes:

> By "white anxieties" I mean to signal a state of aggression by Euro-American intellectuals, policy analysts, and others who must now confront their ever decreasing power to have their partial view of the world appear as the only legitimate view of the world.

[4] Talking about the contemporary metropolitan West, Walcott writes that the western cities are not just multicultural and constitute of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences but also post-colonial in the sense that they are separate from the regime of "earlier moments of colonial arrangements in condition and in figuration" (42). See *Queer Returns.*

> In this new context, a kind of white anxiety has come into being, in which previous compromises are being rethought so as to preserve what can only crudely be called white power. White anxieties, in this case, are dressed up in terms of debates on rights discourses, the future of the liberal democratic state, tensions between the secular state and religion, and so on. In each case, white anxieties betray themselves in their bearers assumptions of the role of steward of the conversation, dialogue, and debate, thus positioning themselves as the protectors of the continually unfolding "freedoms" of secular liberal democratic societies. Consequently, all others, usually racialized others, become the barbarians screaming at the doors. The racial contract manages those screamers for better or worse. (97)

This comprehensive description of "white anxieties" highlights two important arguments: 1) in the wake of posturing as the protector of freedom in the West, white supremacy ideologies resist all conversations about the creation of diversity as a political solution, and 2) minority communities or people who speak about racism as the cause of the problem are often ousted as anti-nationals by white supremacists. Within such a theoretical context it is easy to consider how making Lizet Ramirez's story in *Make Your Home Among Strangers* a required text in

first-year experience program at a PWI can be problematic and generate extremist views among some students.

Capó Crucet's novel portrays a female, first-generation Cuban American student's identity crisis and displacement at the elite, predominantly non-Hispanic white Rawlings College. The reality of Lizet's story as a girl shuttling between Hialeah, Florida (a predominantly Cuban American city near Miami) and Miami's Little Havana neighborhood to her elite liberal arts college in the American Northeast resonates with many Latine minority and disadvantaged students across the U.S. In the episode where Lizet meets a fellow Latina, who is doing a postdoc in Michigan on her way back home for Thanksgiving, the girl tells Lizet the importance of two Latina girls sticking together: "We're two girls from Hialeah who left for, you know, better things, right? More opportunities? . . . We have to stick together, right?" (Crucet 20).[5]

The sentiment echoed here is that as a woman, getting out of Hialeah and moving to other parts of the U.S. is a milestone that drags down Lizet, who finds it ever harder to admit that she is no longer from Hialeah but from Little Havana. After her parents' separation, Lizet's mother and sister, Leidy, move to the poorer parts of Little Havana from their old house in Hialeah due to a sudden financial crisis.

[5] Hialeah is a city in Miami-Dade County, Florida, and is notable for its high Hispanic population (mostly Cuban American), the highest proportion among incorporated communities outside of Puerto Rico.

In addition to her disenfranchised background, Lizet gets intimately entangled in the Elián González saga, which is portrayed through the fictional Ariel Hernandez in this novel. Ariel is the six-year-old survivor of a journey across the Florida Straits made by those escaping Cuba's Communist regime in hopes of reaching Miami. Mirroring the international custody battle that tore apart Miami and the Cuban American community in 2000, Ariel's homecoming clashes with Lizet's homecoming to Miami in a way that becomes an inseparable part of her diasporic identity. Because of Capó Crucet's Cuban American identity and the fact that as a first-generation student she herself had access to an elite PWI in the U.S. makes this novel fall under the semi-autobiographical genre that addresses issues surrounding the diaspora, the ethnic enclave, nationhood, and finally, one's racial and ethnic identity. Grappling with all these factors reveal the difficulties in finding a sense of belonging when one is displaced, especially when that displacement is manifold.

Capó Crucet's novel was included in the reading list of first-year English and writing courses as part of Georgia Southern's "discuss diversity and inclusion" program. However, the actual process of reading and understanding the novel from the author's perspective exposes the discomfort that a primarily non-Hispanic white audience was unable to negotiate. Examining the mutual discomfort caused when a Latina body (in this case both Capó Crucet and the fictional Lizet) inhabits a non-

Hispanic white space, Sara Ahmed contends, "[T]he body that causes their discomfort (by not fulfilling an expectation of whiteness) is the one who must work hard to make others comfortable . . . If whiteness is what the institution is oriented around, then even bodies that do not appear white still have to inhabit whiteness" (Ahmed 41). Both Capó Crucet at Georgia Southern and Lizet Ramirez at Rawlings refuse to inhabit this whiteness and therefore appear as figures of resistance.

Many mainstream media accounts of the book-burning event tended to either focus on the actions of those burning the novel or on the author for her depiction of whiteness in her writing and talk. Yet the video documenting the book burning drew attention from other forces at play behind such a catastrophe, namely "institutional commitment to a first-year experience program bearing responsibility for fostering public engagement with 'diversity' among 18- and 19-year-olds" (Shih). Critics remarked that the events at the university were the result of dubious institutional expectations that the delivery of "diverse" content will by itself generate more equitable and inclusive campus communities. Such programs can be seen "symptomatic of an institutional shift" in resources away from faculty expertise and toward administrative solutions when it comes to student centered learning, especially in the humanities.[6]

[6] See "Another Thing the Book Burning at Georgia Southern Reveals" by David Shih, *Inside HigherEd,* November 25, 2019.

Therefore, considering the character of Lizet as a case study or a prototype for minority students like Capó Crucet generates the difficult conversations that are junctures of discomfort and, theoretically speaking, white anxieties.

Lizet, the novel's protagonist and narrator, is the 18-year-old daughter of working-class Cuban immigrants in Hialeah. Lizet resists her Cuban family's traditional expectations by choosing an elite liberal arts institution in upstate New York rather than attending a college in Miami to be close to her family. Rawlings College is modeled after Cornell University, the Ivy League institution where Capó Crucet studied. Rawlings College and its location proves to be both culturally and geographically distant from her predominantly Spanish-speaking home. Reading the novel as an academic bildungsroman exposes the fault lines in the elite higher education system that conditionally invites the ethnic Other to enter only to constantly enquire them about their ethnic origin: "So, where are you from?," Lizet is asked time and again (Crucet 10). Every time she answers she is from Hialeah, she is faced with shock and surprise as if the name of the location itself sounds too foreign to be a part of the United States. Then she clarifies that she is from Miami, to which she gets responses like, "but, where are you *from* from?" (Crucet 10). At Rawlings, it becomes difficult for her white peers to place her in "Hialeah" or even in "Miami" as her name, "Lizet Ramirez," her brown

skin and dark hair make them label her as a non-American outsider even before they inquire, “where are you *from* from?”.Ultimately, Lizet caves in and admits that her family is from Cuba, but she has neither traveled there nor does she know Fidel Castro personally.

As a result of this identity hazing, Lizet seeks an environment where she can be included as she tries to adapt to fit in with the shifting realities around her. Exploring the notion of belonging to a community or place, sociologist Philip Kasinitz asks, whether we all have a right to feel as though we are a part of “a physical and political space for ‘our’ people - even if that peoplehood comes about through [...] an act of imagination”; and he further inquires, “[w]hat does it mean to feel ‘at home’ in a family, a neighborhood, or a country?” (881). Lizet grapples with these pivotal questions as the gap between her life in Little Havana and her life at Rawlings become irreconcilable. Her displacement throughout the novel is multifarious and each juncture marginalizes her further. As such, one can see white anxieties regarding multiculturalism as a “managerial tool used by the state” or the organization against those “who resist state-imposed, policy-driven differences” (Walcott 98). Lizet never consciously defies administrative policies at Rawlings but her presence as a Cuban American, first-generation student from an underserved high school does not perfectly fit the description of the ideal model minority student at an elite liberal arts college.

The Cuban American community in Miami Lizet belongs to are a group of immigrants connected intimately by a discourse of exile from an island ruled by a despotic leader. As they themselves struggle to shed their sense of belonging with their island home, they also become incapable of fully accepting Miami as their new, forever home. For her parents and the older members of the Cuban exile community coming to America was like, "coming out of the Caribbean . . . under the rules of European modernity, (having) to make themselves 'native to a place they were not from'" (Walcott 73). To further the conversation about the positionality of Lizet and her immigrant Cuban community, Stuart Hall's assessment concerning the forced migrations of minority communities is helpful:

Migration constitutes a disruptive cultural force within globalization. Unlike earlier phases, where the problems of religious, social, and cultural difference were held at a safe distance from the metropolitan homelands, contemporary migration intrudes directly into, disturbs, challenges, and subverts, metropolitan cultural space. It projects the vexed issue of pluralism and difference into the settled monocultural spaces of the Western metropolis. It has produced an epistemic rupture, generating the thematics of a new problematic – that of the postcolonial moment. (195)

The story of Lizet is a prototype of the thousands of Cuban families that fled their island home stifled by economic conditions and a dearth of opportunities. They reach for their American dreamland that promises

them and their children a life of security. However, they establish themselves in an ethnic enclave where virtually everyone else in their community is either Cuban or Cuban American. Therefore, even in their seemingly safe new home they are surrounded by a distorted nostalgia that romanticizes the reality they left behind. Lizet, like many others in her generation in Miami, grew up with stories about her family and their community without her ever questioning the authenticity of those tales. Exile and homelessness are a normative part of Capó Crucet's generation's diasporic complexities. Hence, Capó Crucet's portrayal of Lizet's positionality at Rawlings is strongly symbolic of contemporary migration intruding into the cultural spaces of the American college.

The early part of the novel based in Hialeah Lakes High School introduces Lizet as a high achieving student. Unfortunately, Hialeah Lakes High is an institution that has attracted national attention for being "an underserved high school" -- or an institution that has underperformed severely. At Hialeah High, Lizet maintains an all-rounder's profile earning high marks in her classes, and actively participating in extracurricular activities in the student government. However, at Rawlings College, amid a population of mostly wealthy legacy students, Lizet's past experiences don't help her newcomer self who lacks knowledge of institutional expectations and practices such as academic advising, tutoring centers, work-study opportunities, or plagiarism policies. Her acceptance letter to

Rawlings mentions “work-study,” which Lizet wrongfully understands as “a mysterious line in my aid package that I thought had something to do with working for the government or joining the army” (Crucet 7). This lack of knowledge is again reflected in the way Lizet submits one of her assignments for the freshman writing class. She accidentally plagiarizes a part of her paper and is summoned for a hearing by the Academic Integrity Committee.

At her hearing, she is given a second chance based on her association with Hialeah Lakes High School which “was so shitty that the people at Rawlings had read an article about it in *The New Yorker*” (Crucet 11). It becomes clear to the committee that Lizet has been admitted to such a renowned school based on sheer academic merit and not because of careful grooming that many of her Rawlings classmates had access to before joining. Ultimately, when the committee members explain to her what “academic probation” means for her, one professor discloses that, apparently no administrator or staff member at her squalid public high school was even aware of the school’s code of academic integrity (Crucet 11). Even the dean of Rawlings explains to Lizet that it was safe to conclude that Hialeah Lakes “didn’t foster something that we’re calling a culture of success” (96). Lizet’s incognizance about the academic jargon used by the committee and the dean enforces upon her the crude realization that her Ivy League present has no semblance with her Hialeah

Lakes High School past. The committee members rearticulate their assessment of her case in simpler language for her to understand: "what [we're] trying to say is we believe you sincerely didn't know better. You haven't been given, at any point in your academic career prior to coming here, the tools to know better. So yes, you are guilty, but you are also blameless" (96). In this instance, the word "blameless" lacks a positive affirmation. It only reaffirms the major class difference between her background and Rawlings, and the fact that she is an outsider who is not an appropriate fit for the academic culture of the college.

The set of academic integrity practices and policies that the committee and the dean underscore here are only available to a privileged student body who come to Rawlings from similar elite PWIs. Instead of fostering the ethics of academic learning, what Rawlings ends up imposing is a culture of bias promoting further segregation between the students who are simply transferring from one elite institution to another and students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are admitted on a merit basis only.

This can be seen as a process of imposing whiteness since it is a well-known fact that most disadvantaged students come from non-white communities and are less likely to go to college as compared to their white peers; and despite being aware of that, Rawlings does not have policies that cater specifically to disadvantaged students.[7] This reproduction of

institutional whiteness is multiple in nature and can be understood through the framework suggested by Walcott. He explains this concept as,

First it is the people that we have come to call white people, and it clearly relies on phenotype; but most importantly, whiteness is also a *structure*, and by this I mean a set of logics, ideals, and practices that work to reproduce white people as superior to others and therefore as benefitting from a society built to confer and confirm that superiority. Second, by whiteness I mean to also signal "a structure of feeling" in which those marked as white share in and benefit from the conditions that produce societal advantages for white people. Additionally, those not marked as white are positioned as aspirants to it. ("Diversity" 395; emphasis added)

By labelling whiteness as a "structure," Walcott signals at the racial hierarchy that equalizes whiteness with superiority.

Institutional whiteness at Rawlings College also works in the same way and propagates academic excellence as elitism. Lizet is not expelled for committing plagiarism simply due to Rawlings' presumed awareness of the optics of expelling an economically disadvantaged student of color.

[7] Discussing this racial disproportion in student enrolment, Anthony Jack contends that, "the more selective the college, the fewer the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in terms of both class and race" (4). See *The Privileged Poor* by Anthony Jack.

Consequently, in her eagerness to please the college authorities, Lizet sides with the committee's estimation of her as an unsophisticated newbie who needs to be trained to become a part of Rawlings. She signs the contract of her probation without so much as a glance at its contents. She regrets not reading the contract before signing, not because she is hesitant about the terms and conditions of the document but because she wants to maintain a show of naïveté and the need to be rescued from the squalor of her background that she has conveyed to the Rawlings administrators with her blind acceptance. Lizet's desire to feel "at home" in this new elite academic environment results in her vulnerability and subsequent embarrassment that highlights her outsider status more than her belonging. Coming from a severely disadvantaged educational background, Lizet's potential for success at the prestigious Rawlings College is questionable. The academic committee members express their concerns regarding the same issue as Lizet chooses to pursue a major in Biology. The college authorities' white anxiety is triggered as they realize Lizet is not pre-trained in the ways Rawlings expects their students to conduct themselves.

Capó Crucet writes that when she was admitted to an elite school in upstate New York, her family couldn't find the answer to the simple question of how long they were supposed to stay for their daughter's first-year orientation. In the author's words,

This may seem easy enough to answer now, but this was 1999 and Google wasn't yet a verb, and we were a low-income family (according to my new school) without regular internet access. I was the first in my family to go to college, which made me a first-generation college student as well as a first-generation American, because my parents were born in Cuba. We didn't know that families were supposed to leave campus almost immediately after they unloaded your stuff from the car. (*My Time* 3-4)

While this issue might seem trivial, it reveals the unpreparedness and what Capó Crucet calls a "very special kind of lost" status of low-income families (18). The author's family had no idea what they were expected to say or do at a college as they themselves had never been to one.[8] This sentiment echoes Anthony Jack's foundational argument from the *Privileged Poor* that access is not inclusion and intellectual freedom is not available to everyone.

The episode of burning copies of *Make Your Home Among Strangers* is a significant propellant to Walcott's perspective that "diversity as an idea has reached its logical end" (*Queer Returns* 394).

[8] Italics mine.

Walcott criticizes the term "diversity" and its many accompanying synonyms like "anti-racism," "equity" and so on which contribute to diversity work or the "poor attempt at structural justice and social transformation" ("Diversity" 294). While Walcott's cynicism is valid given our current sociopolitical moment, including books like Capó Crucet's *Make Your Home Among Strangers* as a part of the undergraduate curriculum still works to alleviate the failure of diversity. Diversifying the curriculum carries the potential to prompt critics and equity practitioners to reconsider the urgency for unmaking and remaking the institutional inclusion policies within regimes of North American power and belonging.[9]

[9] Capó Crucet equates this feeling of being lost with "a kind of resentment" that many first-generation college students have as they are born in disadvantaged families who themselves do not know how to help their children. See p. 18 in *My Time Among the Whites*.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS AND EDITORS

Tejan Green Waszak is an Assistant Professor of Writing Studies and Rhetoric at Hofstra University. Her primary research interests and publications are in the fields of Black feminist rhetorics, writing studies, Caribbean performance and cultural studies, postcolonial literary studies, media studies, and poetry.

Ethna Dempsey Lay is an Associate Professor of Writing Studies and Rhetoric at Hofstra University. Blogging with her students since 2009, Lay studies the changing nature of literacy in these digital times. She is particularly engaged in investigating the way contemporary student writers make meaning in print and digital ways. Her research on writing and AI neatly complements this work.

Chris Clemens teaches and writes in Toronto, where he has defeated 8.5 raccoons (with help from his wonderful family). Nominated for Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net, his stories and poems appear in Best Microfiction 2026, Matter Press, The Literary Review of Canada, Strange Horizons, Year's Best Canadian Fantasy and Science Fiction, and elsewhere.

David Kaloustian, a Professor in the Department of Language, Literature, & Cultural Studies at Bowie State University, holds a DPhil and MPhil in English from Oxford University and an M.A. and B.A. in Comparative Literature from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His main areas of expertise are located at the intersections of British Romanticism, literary theory, and aesthetics, but his publications and presentations show evidence of an eclectic bricolage of methods and subjects ranging from archival research to cultural criticism. His current research project involves the use of Frankfurt School culture critique to understand how the aesthetic may subvert some of the deleterious effects of instrumental reason.

Helene Seltzer Krauthamer is a Professor of English at the University of the District of Columbia and holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics. Besides her dissertation on "The Occurrence of Passives in Written English" (State University of New York at Buffalo, 1982), she has published two books: *Spoken Language Interference Patterns in Written English* (Peter Lang, 1999) and *The Great Pronoun Shift* (Routledge, 2021). She currently serves as the treasurer of the College English Association Mid-Atlantic Group and has been a member since 1992.

Sean Lewis is an Associate Professor of English at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland. He has published on Chaucer, Dante, and the reception of medieval literature, and his current research is on medievalism in contemporary Catholicism. He teaches extensively in the Mount's Humanities Core and English major and is currently serving as the Director of the Honors Program.

Kevin Lopez Cruz is an aspiring university professor and public servant in his final year of undergraduate study at Bowie State University, the oldest HBCU in Maryland. His research has been published in *Archival Outlook* and he serves as Vice President for Undergraduate Affairs of the University System of Maryland Student Council.

Suchismita Dutta is an Assistant Teaching Professor of Technical Writing & Cultural Rhetoric and the Interim Director of First-Year Writing at Emory University. Her research broadly incorporates issues of representation and multimodal literacies in critical pedagogy. She has presented her work at major conferences including the 4Cs, MLA, MELUS, and SAMLA. Her scholarship has appeared in Impost: A Journal of Creative and Critical Work, [Inter]Sections: The American Studies Journal, and other venues. She is the recipient of the 2025-2026 CCCC Emergent Researcher Award for her project, Teaching the Discourse Community: Atlanta's Race, Technology and Literacy Justice.

Daisy Miller is an Associate Professor of Writing Studies and Rhetoric. Before joining the Hofstra faculty in 2005, she was a civilian professor at the United States Military Academy. Her teaching and publications focus on students' professional identity, metacognition, nostalgia, satiric news, and the rhetoric of apostasy. She has been honored by the Communal Studies Association for her work on the Shakers. Her current work centers nostalgia as an archival mechanism in contemporary culture and politics.

Shakil Rabbi is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Virginia Tech University. Before his current position, he served as the Coordinator of Composition at Bowie State University. He works in the areas of sociolinguistics, rhetoric, and writing studies. He has previously taught in primary school and university contexts in Southeast Asia (Thailand) and South Asia (Bangladesh—where he is from).

Benjamin S. Grossberg's books of poetry include *My Husband Would* (University of Tampa, 2020), winner of the 2021 Connecticut Book Award, and *Sweet Core Orchard* (University of Tampa, 2009), winner of a Lambda Literary Award. He also wrote the novel, *The Spring Before Obergefell* (University of Nebraska Press, 2024), winner of the 2023 AWP Award Series James Alan McPherson Prize.

Jordan J. Dominy is an Assistant Professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery, where he teaches courses on a variety of topics, including first-year writing, African American literature, US Southern literature, and literary and cultural theory. In 2020, he published his book *Southern Literature, Cold War Culture, and the Making of Modern America* (UP of Mississippi). His most recent publications focus on the works of Cormac McCarthy. His current research investigates tensions among fact, fiction, representation, and reality in southern narrative since the late twentieth century.

Jake Dennis @PoetOfJazz is a Burmese-Australian Boorloo-based entertainer (singer/poet/actor), carer, and educator. A 2025 WestWords academician, Writing WA Emerging Writer, and City of Swan Writer-in-Residence, Jake was recognised by judges of eighteen competitions between 2023-2026 with prizes from *eMerge Magazine*, Poetic Christi

Press, *Red Room Poetry*, and Rocky River 'Riters. JD loves animals, art, cooking, film & TV, gardening, literature, op-shopping, and travelling. Published recently by *Frogpond*, *Poetry Aotearoa*, *New Contrast*, *Rabbit*, *Splinter*, *Suspect*, *Wasafiri*, *Westerly*, etc., Jake Dennis is soulful jazz crooner shortlisted for the Noel Rowe Poetry Award for his debut collection *Journeying* (Fremantle Press, 2027).

Melissa Garcia Criscuolo earned her B.A. in English from Florida International University and her M.F.A. in poetry from the University of Florida. Her poems have appeared with *The Banyan Review*, *Superpresent*, *The Acentos Review*, *Mezzo Cammin*, and *bedfellows*, among others. In addition, her work has been anthologized in *The Power of the Feminine I: poems from the feminine perspective, Volume 1*, as well as with *Portland Review's Unchartable: On Environmental Unknowns*. Finishing Line Press published her chapbook, *Things in My Backyard*. She teaches literature and writing at Florida Atlantic University.

Nnadi Samuel holds a B.A. in English and Literature from the University of Benin. His works have been previously published/forthcoming in *Commonwealth Writers*, Scottish Poetry Library, *Suburban Review*, *Seventh Wave Magazine*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Quarterly West*, *ROOM*, *PORTER HOUSE Review*, *Westerly*, *Yolk Literary Journal*, and elsewhere. Author of *Nature knows a little about Slave Trade*, selected by Tate N. Oquendo (Sundress Publication, 2023). Winner of the Capilano Review 2025 Fall Writing Contest. A 4x Best of the Net, and 8x Pushcart Nominee. His third micro-chapbook *Biblical Invasion, BC* published @Bywords Publication (Ottawa CA) in 2024. He tweets @Samuelsamba10.

Horacio Sierra is a Professor of English at Bowie State University, Maryland's oldest HBCU. His research and teaching interests include Renaissance literature, popular culture, and U.S. Hispanic literature and culture. Dr. Sierra's academic work has been published in *Comparative Drama*, *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, *Public Humanities*, *Early Modern Women*, *Women's Studies*, *Journal of Florida Literature*, *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, and *Theatre Journal*. His creative writing has been published in *The William & Mary Review*, *Gulf Coast Magazine*,

Caribbean Writer, *Peregrine*, and *The Journal of Florida Studies*. His journalism has been published in *The Washington Post*, *Forbes*, *The Baltimore Sun*, and *The Miami Herald*. He is 2nd Vice President of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association. In 2023 President Biden appointed him to the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

Orlando Ricardo Menes is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Notre Dame and the author of eight poetry collections, including *The Gospel of Wildflowers & Weeds* (2022), *Memoria* (2019), *Heresies* (2015), and *Fetish* (2013), winner of the 2012 Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry. Recent poems have appeared in *The Yale Review*, *American Poetry Review, Copper Nickel*, the *Bennington Review*, and the *Birmingham Poetry Review*. His next poetry collection, entitled *Origins*, will be published by Slant Books in 2027.

John Saillant is a Professor of English and History at Western Michigan University. He received all his degrees from Brown University in American Civilization (now Studies) before moving to Michigan in 1997. His work since the 1990s has focused on African Atlantic religion. Recently, returning to his studies with Michael S. Harper (1938–2016), he has begun writing on Sterling A. Brown and Robert Hayden. In addition to the current essay, he has work forthcoming on Brown's oral performance in poetry readings and Hayden's break with the Harlem Renaissance. At WMU, he offers courses in colonial history, Michigan history, American literature, African American literature, and writing in the disciplines. He has been a grievance officer and contract administrator for the WMU chapter of the AAUP and for AFL/CIO local 2412.

Chimi Woo is an Assistant Professor of English at Prairie View A&M University. Her research focuses on nineteenth-century British literature and culture, history of the novel, the Irish national tale, postcolonial studies, and religion and literature. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* and *Intégrité: A Faith and Learning Journal*.

