To Ph.D. or Not to Ph.D.
Deciding the Next Step

Creative Currents
A Conversation with Our Poets

Student Art & Poetry
Alumni Interviews

CAL POLY
San Luis Obispo
English Department
College of Liberal Arts
The poet Edmund Spenser coined the word "blatant" in his 16th-century epic poem "The Faerie Queene." He used the word to refer to a thousand-tongued beast.

Poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge gave us the words "psychosomatic," "selfless" and "greenery," and the phrase "suspension of disbelief."

The only work by Edgar Allan Poe that was popular enough to be reprinted in his lifetime was a non-fiction book on snails.

Novelist George Eliot was the first person to refer to "pop music," in 1862.

"Gadsby" (1939) by Ernest Vincent Wright does not contain any instance of the letter "e."
"Can't bring back time. Like holding water in your hand." (8.610-11)

This observation, generated by a Joycean character haunted by a happy past at war with present heartbreak, distills the difficulty of confronting and actively engaging the terms of unwanted change. Leopold Bloom's impotent thoughts about a deteriorating marriage capture that same spectre of unease currently inhabiting the halls of graduate programs across the country as the nature of what we do in the humanities slowly but inexorably shifts to reflect changing professional realities for our graduates. During this time of transition marked by high rhetoric, impassioned cries, and quiet disdain, we would do well to recall the words of another character in James Joyce's "Ulysses": "We mustn't be led away by words, by sounds of words" (7.483-84).

The Cal Poly Graduate Committee has modified the English graduate program's parameters in recent years, and even more exciting growth lies just around the corner. Determined to retain our reputation for rigor while adapting to the needs of an ever-modulating market, we will soon build on the recently laid foundation of a modified comprehensive exam and expanded course options. We can't wait to share the specifics as they take form. Until then, please second our delight in those enviable traits of our program in its current iteration, elaborated in the pages which follow.

Dr. Paul Rae Marchbanks
Graduate Director
Associate Professor of English
Questions are a central part of our graduate program here at Cal Poly. In class, they shape our pursuit of knowledge. Our professors and peers stymie and stimulate us with questions, from the particular (How does King Lear’s cognitive non-normativity affect his relationship with his daughters?) to the pervasive (What is the epistemological and moral value of art?). Chatting with cohort members outside of class, we pose queries about the role of language, such as tricky linguistic rules and how language shapes all human experience (Derrida comes up often). At home, in the throes of finals week with exams looming and term papers to write, we occasionally find ourselves questioning what exactly possessed us to willingly subject our brains to such torture. And from our families and friends, we often hear "The Big Question": What are you planning to do with your degree? As much as this query can become a bit tedious to hear time and again, it may ultimately also be the most important one we encounter during our tenure as graduate students. For many of us, it’s a big question with a lot riding on it. What do we want to do with our lives after this? Teach? At what level? Go on to earn a Ph.D.? Write? What other options are out there for those with a master’s in English? Some of us seem to have it all figured out — but many others don’t. Thus it is with these questions in mind — especially centered around whether "To Ph.D. or Not to Ph.D.?" (page 10) — that we offer the second edition of The Medial Caesura. We promise that each article in this issue will provide some insight, inspiration or information into the big-picture questions that we all face. And judging from the progress our program’s alumni have made ("Alumni Q&A," page 30) to the diverse creative and intellectual abilities of our current cohort members (see "Creative Currents" on page 22, as well as various artistic and poetic contributions and some frankly amazing paper titles scattered throughout the magazine), we have no doubt that the students in our program will discover great success on whatever paths in life they finally choose to follow.

Editors’ Note

Gisele Olson & Daniela Schirmer
This issue’s survey asked:
Following degree completion, what have our M.A. graduates (since spring 2009) done with themselves?

30.9% teaching at community college or lecturing at college [13 out of 42]
16.6% further graduate work [7 out of 42]
9.5% teaching secondary school [4 out of 42]
9.5% business writing (technical writing, scripts, manuals, etc.) [4 out of 42]
21.4% other [9 out of 42]
11.9% unknown [5 out of 42]

Pedagogy Pic of the Year

Dr. John Hampsey's British Romanticism class responds, in true experimental Blakeian spirit, to a classroom arrangement prank left behind by Dr. Kevin Clark's advanced undergraduate poetry class. "I'm sure we can crank out a couple articles on this [backwards teaching], if not a book. The Chronicle of Higher Education is already planning to come interview us. Now if we can just get Marchbanks on board," Hampsey said.

Photo by Erin Escobar
"Sisters and brothers, little maid, / How many may you be?"
"How many? Seven in all," she said / And wondering looked at me.

"We Are Seven" by William Wordsworth, 1798

1. VAST

vast.alexanderstreet.com

Accessible through the Kennedy Library website: http://find.lib.calpoly.edu/databases/database/CAL21753

While MLA, JSTOR and Project MUSE constitute go-to databases for scholarly work, every once in a while it may be useful to explore outside of the medium of written articles to enrich our knowledge as students and teachers. We do so much reading; why not beef up our expertise with added visual and audible information? Documentaries, lectures, interviews, reenactments and theatrical productions, for example, are enlivening modes of learning that give context to what we study. All too often we as students resort to poor quality YouTube videos or fragmented clips, or we are left to scrounge through Netflix’s streaming selection while seeking contextual material. VAST is a multidisciplinary online database that not only offers full footage, but also offers transcripts of thousands of videos produced by the likes of BBC and PBS on subjects such as art, history, women’s studies, ethnic studies, feature films, economics and science, to name a few. Head over to the "Literature/Lang" heading and find enticing titles such as "Quest for King Arthur," "Daughters of de Beauvoir" or "Salman Rushdie: Between Devil and the Deep Blue Sea."

2. GOODREADS

goodreads.com

Goodreads: the Facebook for lit nerds. Social networking can be an incredible tool that fosters communication and discussion. Not only is Goodreads a place to keep track of the books you have read, or where you may "meet your next favorite book," it’s also a place where readers often post lively, engag-
ing and surprisingly intelligent reviews. Many students in our current cohort use Goodreads to keep lists of books finished or books to read in anticipation of the Comprehensive M.A. Exam. The site offers an engaging and useful way to maintain a virtual bookshelf sharable with others. Goodreads also offers free e-books, recommendations, book groups and a great app. And of course, all of your activity is linkable with Facebook.

3. This Day in 'Lettres', The American Reader

http://theamericanreader.com/category/day-in-lettres/

Whether you are fascinated by notions of authorial intention or would like a glimpse into the minds and hearts of our greatest artists and thinkers, look no further than The American Reader’s website dedicated to showcasing the letters and correspondence of literary greats. It will make you wish the epistolary tradition wasn’t a dying one. Plus, you’ll get to savor morsels such as this: "Have ready a bottle of brandy, because I always feel like drinking that heroic drink when we talk ontological heroics together." That is Herman Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne on June 29, 1851, immediately preceding a paragraph that discloses the "secret motto" of "Moby Dick." Curious yet?
The American Reader is a print and digital literary journal. As stated on its website, the journal "is committed to inspiring literary and critical conversation among a new generation of readers and restoring literature to its proper place in the American cultural discourse." While there are many renowned journals online worth visiting, such as The Paris Review, Granta and The New Yorker (particularly its book blog), The American Reader creates a simple balance between remembering and incorporating the literary past and fostering a contemporary critical eye; in this respect, it is student-friendly and offers a compatible academic diversion.

4. **The Public Domain Review**

publicdomainreview.org

Imagine a place where all the curiosities and gems of the vast collection of digital material from the public domain get spotlighted by intelligent detectives. The Public Domain Review is that place and operates as a nonprofit whose writers and researchers sift through the archives of out-of-copyright works until they find illuminating topics. It has the flavor of The Smithsonian, and most of the articles deal in the humanities. Current wonders include: "The Lost World of the London Coffeehouse," "The Serious and the Smirk: The Smile in Portraiture," "Simple Songs: Virginia Woolf and Music" and audio of Robert Browning attempting to recite his poetry. The Public Domain Review is a project of the Open Knowledge Foundation, which also runs the OpenGLAM initiative. OpenGLAM makes cultural artifacts held by museums, galleries, archives and libraries around the world accessible online.

5. **Call for Papers**

http://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/

While there are many Call for Papers (CFP) directories out there, University of Pennsylvania’s Department of English provides its site as a courtesy to the academic community. The site’s interface is minimalist and straightforward, which is conducive to the search for applicable academic meetings and conferences around the United States.
A list of categories with topics such as classical studies, medieval literature, ecocriticism and postcolonial studies — to name just a very few — are listed on the left-hand column in alphabetical order. It doesn’t get any easier than this when it comes to submitting your work and advancing your academic career or scholarly interests.

6. **Victorian Web**

victorianweb.org

Do not let the Geocities-reminiscent interface fool you: VictorianWeb is the place for all things seriously Victorian. Professors worldwide point to the online resource, and indeed, it proves to be a wealth of knowledge for students and teachers alike. What the site lacks in visual aesthetics it compensates for with comprehensiveness and usefulness. The information presented is saturated with factual and historical authority as well as academic value. Started in 1987 and affiliated with Brown University, VictorianWeb states that it is unique because it "originated in hypermedia environments … that existed long before the World Wide Web, [and it] is one of the oldest academic and scholarly websites." Furthermore, the site is organized around links so that a user can literally become a virtual explorer of the web of information (which is described as an "ecology") of the Victorian era. Even though VictorianWeb does offer a search engine, its glory is best experienced through immersion. With 1.5 million hits a month, you can bet this is an important resource for any Victorian scholar or enthusiast.

7. **Inside Higher Ed**

insidehighered.com

Like The Chronicle of Higher Education (Chronicle.com), Inside Higher Ed presents news and job offers, as well as opinion that keeps up with the swiftly evolving environment of higher education in the U.S. For those who are career-oriented, or simply researching how and if to pursue a master’s, a Ph.D. or employment in the field of education, the site is an invaluable resource. Both IHE and The Chronicle should be investigated when applying or interviewing — familiarity with the market will give you a good idea of what’s out there and what’s to come.
**To Ph.D. or Not to Ph.D.?**

*By Gisele Olson & Daniela Schirmer*

That is the question: Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of incessant scholarship or to take arms against a sea of papers and by opposing, end them ... Okay, okay. Sorry, Bill. But Hamlet’s iconic existential soliloquy actually provides a rather appropriate platform from which to launch a discussion about the as-good-as existential question many undergraduate and master’s students have: is it worth it to dedicate my life to the pains and pleasures of scholarship by pursuing a Ph.D. and a career in the highest echelons of academe?

Some students enter Cal Poly’s English graduate program with no further plans for graduate work after their
time here. Others are certain a Ph.D. program of some variety is in their future, even after reading Gregory Semenza’s eye-opening "Graduate Study for the 21st Century" in English 501 (Techniques of Literary Research). Many of us, however, aren’t quite sure what’s next. We love studying literature — reading it, writing about it, discussing it with our classmates and professors — but we’re not wholeheartedly convinced that further graduate work is the most desirable, or pragmatic, course for our lives for the next five to 10 years after our time at Cal Poly, not to mention the prospect of the 30- to 40-year career in academe for which a Ph.D. would prepare us. Fortunately, we have a slew of extraordinarily knowledgeable faculty members in our English Department — as well as alumni from our program currently pursuing doctoral studies — who are happy to offer advice, and they have it in spades when it comes to the question of "to Ph.D. or not to Ph.D."

Dr. Paul Marchbanks, associate professor of English and the graduate director of the English M.A. program, says that the most important thing to determine when deciding whether to pursue a Ph.D. is the extent to which one is really excited about and dedicated to scholarship. The ideal Ph.D. candidate, he says, is "someone who’s very intrinsically motivated — whose passion for literature is so strong that it will help them leap over a variety of obstacles." In addition to evincing qualities such as merit, passion and resilience, Ph.D. students should also confront those social and economic factors that lie outside their control. Associate Professor Dr. Brad Campbell insists that "it becomes unethical for any of us to just broadly encourage people to give it a shot." For Campbell and his colleagues, feelings of passion and gratitude are tempered by their sobriety about the drawbacks and sacrifices involved in pursuing such a career. And so, in the spirit of responsibility rather than demotivation, we will begin with some precautions.

Cautiousness is necessary, not only because obtaining a Ph.D. is difficult, but because the system, in many ways, does not predispose itself to easily securing a career in academe after completing a Ph.D. program. Campbell confesses that "without slighting the work I did to get here, it still comes down to more than merit. It comes down to a combination of just being in the right place at the right time. There are plenty of people who are unbelievably brilliant Ph.D.-holders who may never get a tenure-track job." And even though Campbell did secure a tenure-track position a year after working as a lecturer at Cal Poly, he insists on the role that both luck and circumstance played in his success. Furthermore, he expresses that the challenge hasn’t ended. The "anxiety wheel," as he calls it, is still in motion, and things like wage freezes and not being able to acquire resources for research can problematize one’s career. Other professors make hefty sacrifices to enable them to pursue their calling. For
instance, Associate Professor Dr. Regulus Allen commutes from Los Angeles, where her family resides, to San Luis Obispo, where she spends three nights a week while teaching.

It is also important to be familiar with the "numbers" that will confront a graduate once he or she is in the job market. The Modern Language Association’s most recent survey, completed in 2004, revealed that 49.4 percent of English Ph.D.s found tenure-track jobs. That was just before the economic slump. With budget cuts in recent years, it is feasible that the percentage has dipped even lower. In 2004, 20.5 percent of Ph.D.-holders found non-tenure-track teaching jobs. Others found administrative jobs, and 6.7 percent found jobs outside higher education. Another 3.3 percent were unemployed. Aside from numbers, other factors should be weighed, such as the fact that the job market is saturated with individuals with doctorates, meaning that not everyone will be able to find employment in the city or region they desire, and their search for jobs will likely need to be nationwide. Many may also find themselves having to relocate at some point in their careers. However, relocation is not necessarily a function of desperation. On the contrary, those who have spent upwards of 10 years earning a Ph.D. don’t just settle for any job anywhere: according to the 2006 "Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion," more than 20 percent of tenure-track professors actually relocate to a new position at another institution before coming up for tenure. Often, and for a range of reasons both personal and monetary, recent graduates tend to move through a number of jobs before they settle at one institution.

Speaking of the financial, let’s get down to that rudest rudimentary: the money factor. It is common knowledge that most professors don’t make six-figure salaries, and if such compensation is required, then alternative routes may need to be considered. But as the old adage goes, "Where there is a will, there is a way." If earning potential is a priority, then one myth should get busted: that a tenured position earns the highest income. The best thing to do as a prospective applicant concerned with job placement is to peruse sources such as The Chronicle of Higher Education (chronicle.com) and see what kind of mentorship and career resources exist for each doctoral degree program you are considering.

Another myth to bust is that Ph.D. programs themselves are a jackpot in terms of funding, at least compared to master’s programs, which generally offer little or no institutional monetary support. A "fully funded" Ph.D. program that also offers "generous living and research stipends" may sound quite appealing to many M.A. students. However, not all Ph.D. programs offer these kinds of desirable incentives, and even those that do can leave a student living on a meager annual income when everything is said and done. Considering the debt
burden that many students already have when they enter Ph.D. programs, students might want to consider aiming for programs that pay for them to be there — and steer clear of those that will mire them in even more debt.

While the outlook pre- and post-Ph.D. may be confusing, inconsistent or even harrowing, Marchbanks offers the reminder that some students may be so passionate about studying literature that the reality of having to incur (more) debt might not be a deal breaker. "One question you have to ask in deciding to pursue a Ph.D.," he says, "is 'can I identify some topic that I enjoy so much that I am willing to live and breathe it, and am I willing to pursue it even in the absence of institutional support?'" If the answer to these questions is a resounding and unwavering "yes," then even programs that don’t offer monetary support may still be worth considering. In this case (and even in the case of partially or fully funded programs), it may be wise to explore other types of financial backing, such as independent/non-institutional grants and fellowships, before jumping (back) on the loan bandwagon. Consider Marchbanks's assertion that "Ph.D. coursework usually takes two or three years, and the dissertation can take any-
where from two [...] to 10 years." Without a doubt, it is important to thoroughly think through and explore all the details concerning how you’ll make such a serious commitment work — including what you’re willing to sacrifice, both financially and personally, to pursue your dream.

Despite all the hurdles, Marchbanks suggests that the economy is improving and that, depending on your level of dedication and your willingness to do as well as you possibly can in your Ph.D. program (including writing strong, publishable material early in the game), you still may find the professorial job of your dreams. One Cal Poly English M.A. alumna, Helen Knight (2009), is currently finishing her Ph.D. in literary studies at Purdue University (see her Alumni Q&A on page 36). Knight asserts the kind of certitude that drives a successful Ph.D. candidate: "I realized I wanted a Ph.D. about halfway into my M.A. when two things happened: 1) I discovered I really liked reading early American novels and writing about them, and 2) it occurred to me I could make a viable career out of those pastimes as a professor." She applied to 11 schools and prudently chose Purdue because it had "the best combination of faculty expertise in [her] area and funding."

Another alumna, Carli Sinclair (2012), just started a Ph.D. program in September 2013 at the University of Missouri, where she is fully funded by a teaching assistantship. Her current disposition is bright. She says, "I always knew I wanted to get my Ph.D.; it was in the back of mind at Cal Poly." She also claims that she is fortunate to be at UM after having applied to 13 other top-tier programs. Despite occasionally suffering from "imposter’s syndrome," Sinclair has realized that she is capable of a lot more than she had previously thought. This is because she is juggling so much: teaching rhetoric and composition three times a week, preparing lessons, grading, taking four classes and studying from an incredibly involved reading list. The reading is exceedingly time consuming, but despite that, Sinclair feels she is a step ahead of some of her other cohort members by having already covered many of the composition and rhetoric, theory, and second language requirements while at Cal Poly. Furthermore, she suggests that Cal Poly’s English Comprehensive M.A. Exam gave her a wide knowledge base — a valuable quality that distinguished her as a student when she was applying.
to programs. An example of the intellectual fun that Sinclair is engaged in: she recently took a course on Warhol theory and POPism.

For Sinclair, earning her Ph.D. is certainly a lesson in perseverance and effective time-management, but she sees it as a positive and worthwhile experience. Knight, too, elaborates on the challenges she has faced as she advances toward her expected graduation in 2015: "To make it to candidacy, you have to be able to manage both close readings and theoretical contextualization — in short, the forest and the trees. It also takes a healthy dose of resilience." Right now, her concerns are entrenched in her immediate studies. When asked where she sees herself in three or four years, she responded, "I'd love to be in a tenure-track job teaching American lit, researching and writing about it."

For those faculty members in the English Department at Cal Poly who successfully earned their Ph.D.s and are on the road to tenure, the reminiscences of the valuable aspects of their doctoral experiences (after much humorous lamentation over the intellectual challenges) are important to those of us who would like positive reinforcement regarding potential doctoral studies. One perk is the camaraderie within one’s cohort. For example, Allen has utilized her cohort buddies’ scholarship in her own classroom and attests to the wonderfully interactive exchange that happens within the academic community. Campbell formed rewarding intellectual relation-ships with several well-known scholars in his field while at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and gained a large chunk of wisdom from Nina Baym, former editor of the 7th edition of "The Norton Anthology of American Literature." Baym was influential in shaping Campbell’s own brand of teaching — which, by the way, is widely celebrated by Cal Poly students, who scramble to register for his courses.

What's more, one need not feel pigeonholed by one's academic or research specialty after completing the Ph.D. and hopefully landing a tenure-track position. For example, had Allen not taken the doctoral route, she would have pursued a career in the entertainment industry. Recently she taught an interdis-
disciplinary course titled Restoration and 18th-Century Literature in Film, blending two of her interests in an intriguing way. As Allen and her colleagues demonstrate, earning a Ph.D. and pursuing a career in academia can be fulfilling — as long as you’re fully aware of and willing to accept the realities of scholarship in the 21st century.

While many of our faculty members are literature specialists, Dr. Brenda Helmbrecht, associate professor and director of writing at Cal Poly, earned her Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition. She graduated from Miami University, Ohio, in the summer of 2004, and by the fall of 2004 was employed as the director of writing at Cal Poly. Such quick success in securing her career is something she attributes to the fact that she specialized in composition and rhetoric rather than literature. "Job placement for compositionists is really quite good," she says, adding, "I'd have to say, 'yes,' those with Ph.D.s in rhetoric and composition have an advantage" in the job market. She explains that "composition and rhetoric is still a small field that doesn't generate as many Ph.D.s as literature programs do, which is good for the market. Plus, there are many schools that are still working to develop strong composition programs, so this, too, is good news for the market."

So if you’re perhaps more interested in studying, as Helmbrecht says, "how students use language; how they make arguments; how instructors can best help students communicate more effectively and persuasively; and how students can interact with texts of all kinds in a more critical, discerning manner," then perhaps a composition and rhetoric focus may be for you — and you will likely have better chances of finding a suitable job once you finish your Ph.D. However, no matter what your area of interest, Helmbrecht echoes her colleagues when she cautions, "You really have to know that you want to get a Ph.D. Too many people who are unsure

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**Featured Grad Essay Titles**

"Who Convenes the Conference: Rushdie’s Post-Colonial Superheroes"
*Gareth White*

"’In You That Journey Is’: The Power to Fight Discrimination in ’Angels in America’"
*Erin Escobar*

"Corporality as the Essence of Power: Bodies, Gods and Signs in Seinte Margarete"
*Erin Escobar*

"The True Heroine of ’The House of the Seven Gables’"
*Erin Escobar*

"Ernest Hemingway Walks Into a Bar: A Natural Occurrence."
*Alicia Freeman*
if they want to get a Ph.D. will start programs, accrue debt, devote years to the degree, and never finish."

Having taken into consideration some of these central realities of life in the Ph.D. fast lane, what do you do if you’re still on the fence as to whether or not a Ph.D. is the right path? One thing that might help point your compass is to understand what you can do with a master’s degree. Apart from teaching (whether at secondary schools, either private or public; community colleges; four-year institutions in lecturer and adjunct positions; or overseas venues), there are a variety of other opportunities in such areas as publishing, the corporate world, journalism and the nonprofit sector where people with the skills gained during master’s work in English are highly valued. There are also other types of graduate study that may interest certain students, such as fine arts programs, law school and medicine.

Dawn Janke, Cal Poly’s director of the University Writing & Rhetoric Center and a lecturer for the English Department, exemplifies what one can do with a master’s degree. Janke, who earned her M.A. in English from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, in 2003, has spent the last 10 years working as a lecturer and in writing centers in Illinois, Michigan and California. While she may now be in a different place than she had originally planned for herself (she once wanted to earn a Ph.D., "become a Beat Generation scholar [...] move to Boulder, Colo., and teach at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics"), she says, "I’d not trade the present for a second. Writing center work was one of those moments in life when the universe opened a door for me. I crossed the threshold and never turned back."

However, Janke also says that if she could start over, she’d have liked to go on to a Ph.D. program directly after finishing her master’s. She had always intended to pursue a Ph.D., but family and opportunities to work in writing centers took her down a different path. "I’m fortunate that I have been able to continue on in higher education in the ways that I have," she says, "but there are others like me who paused post-master’s and who struggle in adjunct positions." While Janke may have been lucky to have landed the career she has without earning a doctorate, she’s also a good example of the kinds of opportunities that may await persevering, creative, dedicated master’s degree holders.
Janke also offers good advice when it comes to the question of whether or not to pursue a Ph.D. "A Ph.D. is a major commitment. Those with Ph.D.s make research a part of their lives. They are passionate about producing scholarship on a regular basis. They engage their subject matter as their life’s work. And they are expected from the beginning of their programs to dedicate themselves to that task."

Dr. Campbell didn’t exactly know what he was going to specialize in when he started his Ph.D. program at age 22, but he found his field in American and African-American literature as well as environmental literature. Allen knew from the outset at UCLA that she wanted to focus on 18th-century and Romantic British literature. Marchbanks’s established interest in Victorian and modernist literatures found unexpected but welcome company when graduate studies introduced him to Anglo-Irish literature and dystopic narratives. Helmbrecht knew from the get-go that she

had a strong desire to teach writing. Sinclair pursues women’s and gender studies, and Knight is accomplishing her dream of becoming a scholar of early American literature. As Campbell says, "[Your] subdivision will define your professional identity." Such identity finding can take time and cause stress, but once a student ultimately understands what he or she wants to do, Janke suggests "it [becomes] exciting to consider such a level of commitment. If you can imagine yourself in that realm, then give a Ph.D. some real thought."

For those who can’t imagine themselves in that world, Janke offers this: "Believe me, there are plenty of positions out there for individuals who hold a master’s degree in English." And ultimately, she says that the most important thing is to "think long and hard about who you are in the world, try to envision scenarios in which [you] will blossom, and then trust your intuition as you put one foot in front of the other."

If Hamlet had gotten the same advice, he might never have had his existential crisis in the first place. But then, of course, he also might not be quite as much fun to study.
To master’s students hoping to pursue doctoral programs and careers in academia, Dr. José Navarro may be the perfect role model. He is the quintessential professor: passionate about helping students learn, enthusiastic in exploring his research interests, and an all-around nice person.

"I'm a teacher at heart," Navarro said during an interview late one autumn evening in his office. Indeed, teaching is his favorite thing about his career — an unsurprising fact considering the many years he taught across a diverse array of settings before even beginning work on his doctorate. After earning his undergraduate degree at UC Berkeley, he landed his first job teaching classes at none other than San Quentin State Prison. Then he worked for a while in the Oakland Unified School District. These jobs taught him how to be a teacher — how to connect with and inspire students. However, although his early years teaching were "equally, if not more, rewarding to some degree" than working in a university setting, he craved "a more heightened life of the mind, a different intellectual challenge," and eventually earned his doctorate in English from the University of Southern California.

Navarro is now completing his second year at Cal Poly and, while this institution may not be similar (or at least, not very) to San Quentin State Prison, we students are glad he’s here. Apart from his talent and passion for teaching, he also brings with him expertise in 20th- and 21st-century American literature with particular emphases in Latino, Chicano, African-American, Native American and Asian American literature, allowing him to fill a unique niche in the English Department and add a new layer of expertise to an already stellar faculty.

Navarro says there’s a lot to like about being a professor. In addition to
teaching — or, as he puts it, "get[ting] paid to facilitate intellectual discussions about literature" — he says his research is also gratifying. In fact, to him, research and teaching are "mutually reinforcing and energizing — you can’t be a good teacher unless you’re also a good researcher. Otherwise, your methodology, your pedagogy and your material get old very fast."

While Navarro agrees that the life of a professor is in many ways a noble and rewarding one, he also offers some words of caution to potential Ph.D. seekers. Navarro urges students to get to know "the lay of the land" — both within the profession and in academia generally — before applying to doctoral programs because "the conditions of the market [...] and trajectories of universities aren’t very good right now." He explained that only about 25 percent of faculty members in universities are tenured or tenure-track. That leaves a whopping 75 percent as "contingent" labor in which many scholars end up as adjunct lecturers or with short-term, renewable contracts rather than secure jobs.

While that kind of tenuous employment could, with the right spin, be considered more a blessing than a curse (think flexible, not fragile), Navarro also stresses that in a job market with these rather bleak employment statistics, it’s
important to keep in mind the commitment one takes on when pursuing a doctorate and decide if it’s worth it to enter such a job market afterward. The average length of time to complete a doctorate is about eight years, he says, which can cause students to delay other important things in life they may want to achieve, like starting families. "It’s a lot to give up."

However, for students who simply can’t imagine doing anything else with their lives but earning a doctorate and becoming a professor, there’s certainly still hope, as exemplified by Navarro. He’s a perfect example of a scholar who pursued his passion into a stimulating, enriching career in academia. He spends his time exploring an ever-fascinating world of literature and the ideas that surround it, whether they involve facilitating discussion with his students or entering scholarly discourse with his peers. He even has some time to follow his beloved Cal Golden Bears during football season (he hasn’t missed an opening home game since his freshman year of college) and build cars (until recently, he drove a 1966 Chevy El Camino that he constructed "pretty much from the ground up").

And happily for all of us students, he’s ready to answer our questions. Whether you’re yearning to delve into a discussion about postwar Latino literature in America or simply wondering what things to consider before applying to Ph.D. programs (or not), Navarro’s door is always open. Indeed, he says, master’s students should feel like they can come to him or any other Cal Poly faculty member at any time. "Especially if you have shared interests, we can help you — with papers, with conference papers, any kind of mentoring needs — just come and knock on our doors and say 'hello,' " he says. "We’re nice people."

And we students are lucky people — lucky to have such friendly and knowledgeable mentors at our fingertips, especially one as wise and welcoming as Navarro.

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**Featured Grad Essay Titles**

"Baptizing the 'Idiots': Delimiting Representations of Disability in 'The Violent Bear It Away' "

*Gisele Olson*

"Consuming Disability: Capitalism, Consent and Individualism in Katherine Dunn’s 'Geek Love' "

*Anthony Breakspear*
There is a creative current that runs just under the surface of our English graduate program here at Cal Poly. While we are reading, analyzing, explicating, deconstructing, theorizing, researching, planning, grading, confronting and questioning literature all day every day, others in our department are creating it — privately, it seems — just off the academic radar. There are students who, in between reading three novels, are snatching up minutes to handpick a few words of their own and scratch them down, and professors who close their doors after office hours to work on some creative endeavor or other. Should it feel like a confession to admit that, yes, in all likelihood, some of us lit buffs are dipping our own toes into the creative current, testing the waters and mingling our imaginations alongside the legacies of the authors we worship?

Actually, it’s a myth that the writing is going on secretly. The busiest of us probably just do not notice that a handful of faculty and students in our department are active creative writers, a few do readings locally, some collaborate and others, including Lauren Henley and her husband, Jonathan Maule, both write and publish. Creative work is more widely discussed among the circle of faculty or the undergraduate creative writing majors than by the graduate students in the
department. Most of us probably know that Dr. Kevin Clark is a poet, but few seem to be aware that Henley and Maule run an online literary journal, Aperçus Quarterly, which recently published several of Clark’s poems in issue 2.4. At one point, Henley was Clark’s student back in her undergraduate years at Cal Poly. In 2011, she completed her MFA through Pacific University in Oregon, started Aperçus, moved back to her hometown of Joshua Tree, Calif., and then, in 2013, joined our English graduate program. Henley and Maule ended up publishing all three of Clark’s submissions — "The Funniest Guy I Know Hates Jokes," "The Sheets," and "The Day My Father Died" — alongside works by the likes of David St. John, Dorianne Laux, and our own Jim Cushing, Iris Cushing (Jim’s daughter), David Kann and Lisa Coffman.

Thrilled about being included in Aperçus, Clark expressed his intent to submit more work in the future, but what he most eagerly wanted to discuss during our interview was his recent project — something entirely new in his repertoire of writing: a verse novel. Clark’s artistic vision is completely saturated by his current novel-in-the-making, whose working title is "Magdalene in Ecstasy" and has its roots in a painting of the same name by Sigismondo Coccapani. The image, remembered in a print he purchased at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence, sits centrally in his writing refuge, a cozy home office. "I’ve been looking at that print since 1986," he remarks.

Around that image of spiritual passion, Clark is constructing an intricate plot that weaves the stories of three divergent characters, including the main protagonist, a woman whose Catholicism complicates her sexuality and her relationships. Among the backdrops of surfing culture, Southern California, and Baja in the 1960s and ’70s, the two male characters — an Italian man whose own verse sections draw elements from the work of Italian poet Eugenio Montale; and Jesse, the protagonist’s husband and a Vietnam veteran living with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder — cross in and out of her life. The layering of the novel will be varied as it explores the memories and psyches of the characters and puts into verse their complex psychological experiences including identity crisis, cognitive disassociation and a penchant for serial monogamy. "The great advantage of the verse novel is that you can have individual poems that stand on their own, but also it can be so interior and allow you to look at things psychologically," says Clark.

On their own, a few lines from one of the poems, "Passage," mediate

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between the narrative story at hand and the mysterious depths of the spirit: "... a sudden hairline flaw wounds the body’s mantra / how you must bear the old resistance this divide / a formless memory floating off-stage like frenzy / like the sermons of childhood the interruptions // of priests of prayer of records skipping then catching ..." This personal prayer — a stream of consciousness whose sound is melodic when it slips off the tongue — is just one sample of the diverse expressions that will comprise the verse novel.

Because characters are each given their own highly expressive poetic styles, voice and form unite to generate variety and dynamic artistry in one cohesive yet structurally malleable book.

The writing process has been challenging compared to what Clark is accustomed to. "I’m used to a poem going any direction it wants to go. That’s how many poets write: ‘Let’s discover what we’re going to say in the act of saying it.’ But in a verse novel, each poem has to adhere to some of the plot, so you don’t get as much wild freedom. On the other hand, this constraint can leverage the imagination in a different way. That’s what I’ve been doing, and it’s the work of my life right now." Upwards of 37 poems will comprise the novel, and each of them can stand alone. Seven have already been published individually.

The work of poet Lauren Henley’s life right now, however, has been temporarily supplanted by the rigorous demands of our graduate program. Her first quarter was spent adjusting to the curriculum, as well as being initiated into the theoretical landscape of the first term that serves to situate future studies. There was no time for writing then, but as she begins to study some of the works on the reading list, her own artistic fervor intensifies. When asked if literature studies influences her work, she says, "It all goes in the pot. I could hardly read a page [of Faulkner’s ‘As I Lay Dying’] without writing myself."

It will be interesting to see how Henley’s writing develops while in the graduate program. So far, much of her poetry pivots on nature and the body — although it would be inaccurate to pigeonhole her work since she draws on a surprising variety of images. "Desert with a Cabin View" is her first published chapbook.

Given the title’s syntactic arrangement, one may be inclined to view Henley’s writing as privileging nature and environmental themes. Henley says, "I hadn’t consciously thought I’m writing ecopoetics; I’m writing about the environment;’ but because I spent the first 20 years of my life in Joshua Tree, I just think it’s part of the landscape of my imagination." Influenced by her hometown location, which is widely known for its almost mystical, transcendent natural beauty, her poetry is suffused with the familiarity of her habitat, and it came as a happy surprise when a professor from Cal State San Bernardino recently taught her work in an ecopoetics course.

Henley’s writing contains another significant element that has been medi-
ated by an autoimmune condition that affects her daily life. After a year and a half of symptoms that wreaked havoc on her mobility and exposed her to chronic pain, Henley was finally diagnosed with celiac disease and given the proper treatment and course of action. The illness began after she finished her MFA and was living in Joshua Tree, and it led her to write a raw, visceral series of works: the "how-to" poems. Her prize-winning "How to Take a Walk at Midnight" offers advice that transforms the mundane into the evocative and surprising: "To begin, let your eyes adjust to the night / Focus on something like / a child’s play structure, the gold / or silver stripe of a hose nozzle, or a roll of copper tubing. / When the thing stops changing shape, you are ready." The full poem has been reprinted in this issue of The Medial Caesura (see page 27).

Henley is not shy about her condition and believes in the importance of discussing it. In fact, her creative inquiries into health often manifest in poems that explore body systems. She says, "I kind of see the different towns I’ve lived in as having their own body systems. For example, in Humboldt, it rained nearly every single day, and there was a lot of trash (which you wouldn’t expect), and people littered constantly. When it would rain a lot, the trash that had been buried would come up through the ground, and I couldn’t help but feel like it was sort of a symptom of Humboldt’s body. There are things happening inside a body that you can’t see, like an illness."

Henley fuses her experiences in a remarkable way, and it’s worth keeping an eye on her work, as you never know what will come next. When asked what compels her to write, Henley’s response is beautifully simple, and conveys only the innate comfort she has with the anxiety, the joy and the surprise that is creative writing: "Because I like to."

If there is anyone in the graduate program who would also "like to," Henley is considering offering a poetry workshop targeting grad students and others interested in writing. As well, Clark teaches Advanced Poetry and has published a novice-friendly guide to writing poetry called "A Mind’s Eye."

Creative imaginations are alive and active at Cal Poly; hopefully, celebrating these artistic impulses here will foster more collaboration and inspiration among all of us who love the medium of words.
**POETRY**

**MY BODY, YOUR BODY, NO BODY**

You see this body before you see me,
An externality, a construction indeed.
The hues of my skin, the raft of my voice,
Things that surround me without having a choice.

My mind is no matter
A no matter to feed,
It circles around me
In orbits of speed.

But I am trapped, trapped inside,
Looking for answers, with nowhere to hide.
Illusion it is, hysteria it was
Lost in symbolization, simply because.

Where, where do you go?
When you negate every answer you thought to have known?

Perhaps one day there will be will
When we can watch our bodies lying a still.
With the gaze of an Other
Or perhaps even that, that of our mother.

Can my soul know that which has never been?
Am I merely adding injury to sin?
The sin of appropriation and oppression,
The silence which has yet to feel recession.

Can I give voice to words and worlds which are not mine,
To speak without the insistency of a whine?
The delicacy of intention here lays claim,
To my own retention of moral blame.

I am hesitant of my display,
Which has laid everything out in dismay.
For I am shattering sand
Why don’t you see,
Everything about me
Is lost at sea.

By Anthony Breakspear

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**SKY NAILS & SPA**

I didn’t hear the boom there, over here it was quiet,
Except for the grounded drone of a spa chair,
The bubbles spitting up around my two feet.

Here is my simultaneous place for your posterity.
An unmarked grave in a nail salon on the skids
Running the risk of becoming forgotten.

Your hands, they say — those who saw you go down —
Were clasping for control in sputtering seconds:
You ceased to live in a splint-torn Cessna Skymaster.

With blood delicately intact in soft limbs,
With a fresh coat of red polish dashed on my toes,
How could we have known about the impact?

By Daniela Schirmer
How to Take a Walk at Midnight

Perhaps you cannot sleep.
You have fought with your wife over something trivial,
and she is in bed with her scowl, curled up tight
as a moon snail.

Or perhaps there is something to solve.

You’ve not spoken to your father for sixteen months
and you believe there is still an answer, it is crouching
in the darkness like an escaped panther,
and you must find it by the yellow flit of its eyes.

Or maybe you cannot remember the last time
you felt impulsive and unafraid.

Whatever your reason, taking a walk at midnight
is becoming as popular as surfing
or downhill skiing.

It is true that the ground in front of you
will not curl like the foamy top of a wave or crest
like a Bernese Alp, then drop out all together.
But you will see puddles of engine grease
dancing under moonlight,
the reaching finger-petals of night-blooming cactus,
the golden antennae of field crickets
waving like shafts of wheat, the sweeps of white drapes
in darkened bay windows.
To begin, let your eyes adjust to the night.
Focus on something like

a child’s play-structure, the gold
or silver stripe of a hose nozzle, or a roll of copper tubing.
When the thing stops changing shape, you are ready.
If you want to make your walk more challenging,
apply several drops of glue to the soles of your sneakers
and you will notice the effects immediately.

If you are a more advanced walker seeking a thrill,
tap lightly Morse code on your neighbor’s French doors,
or try to fit your entire arm inside their mailbox.

If this is not enough, and you feel yourself dying,
you can break into a run, either backwards or forwards,
the houses and driveways blurring,
as if you are not from there, as if
you are a train or a bus — you can even make the sounds.
If you are still thinking about your problem,
you may be tempted to stop and gaze at the moon,
as the moon is a rather sad looking thing with a spread-out face
of drifting features. But any advanced walker
will tell you not to be fooled — the moon is bright and dangerous
and no one knows exactly how it works
or what it’s made of.

While earning your master’s degree in English it is not unusual to find yourself — or your parents, for that matter — asking, "So what’s next?" There are the obvious career choices: teaching, writing, editing, etc. And then the less-obvious choices: well, I’m still working on those. If you are like most English majors I have encountered, you probably don’t know which direction to take when you graduate. Regardless of your career path, it is prudent to consider taking some of the skills you’re learning in the English graduate program at Cal Poly and developing them professionally. Not only will you gain "practical" academic experience, but you will also acquire a better sense of what you do and don’t like and, perhaps, what type of job to pursue when you graduate. If you’re thinking about conferences or publications, I offer some of my experiences to give you an idea of what to expect.

I did not begin submitting proposals to academic conferences until my second year in the master’s program. I quickly discovered that the University of Pennsylvania’s website is a great place to start: it contains an archive of "Call For Papers" organized by temporal, thematic and theoretical categories. There’s even a graduate conference section specifically for students, which is helpful if you are nervous about presenting your work among more experienced academics.

The process of applying for a conference is simple — most submissions only require an abstract; others might ask for a curriculum vitae or brief biography. The easiest way to get accepted is by applying to a conference without pre-set panels; when the panels are already determined, you are competing for only three or four spots.

The real work comes once a conference accepts your paper. I found that narrowing an essay into a shorter form — something you can read aloud in 15 or 20 minutes — takes practice. As you cut and revise your paper, you have to read it out loud with a stopwatch to make sure you are within the given frame of time. You also have to take into account how the atmosphere of the conference...
might alter the speed with which you read your paper — perhaps you speak more quickly when nervous.

As a whole, presenting at conferences is intellectually rewarding and can even be quite enjoyable. The other panelists are usually supportive and encouraging, and the audience members are usually pretty nice, too. Occasionally, you’ll encounter people who ask questions about your paper not with the intention of learning more about your topic, but to demonstrate their own intellectual prowess. Usually, however, audience members typically compliment your work and then seek to clarify an idea or offer a suggestion.

My favorite conference thus far, a trauma studies conference in Prague, stands out because of its small size: only 60 scholars were invited to attend, and papers were presented across four days. In such a personalized setting, I made both academic connections and strong friendships. The opportunities for cultural enrichment were pretty great, too.

If you are looking for a way to develop professionally within the comforts of your home, you can always consider submitting a paper for publication in a magazine or journal. The best way to find a journal in which to publish is by starting with "works cited" pages: research the topic you are interested in, choose a couple of articles, and then examine where all of the cited sources come from. This will give you an idea of journal names to which you could submit your own paper. You should also consider your priorities when seeking to publish a paper. In my case, I chose to publish in Magazine Americana because of its open-access policy; it was important to me that my work have an unlimited audience and, moreover, that it could be accessed freely. And, just a few words of advice: be patient. It often takes months to hear back from publishers, so be prepared to wait.

Whether you’re in your first year of Cal Poly’s English graduate program or are about to graduate, attending an academic conference or publishing a paper can help prepare you to use your degree. At the very least, these opportunities to develop professionally will build your confidence for when you do pursue your post-graduate endeavors. Best of luck!
ALUMNI Q&A:  
Luke Hawkins  
November 2013

M.A.: Spring 2011  
Now: Teaching at Cuesta College

Let’s begin with some basic "stats." When did you graduate from Cal Poly? When did you start work at Cuesta College? Tell us a little about yourself.

Luke: I graduated from Cal Poly with my B.A. [in English] in 2007. I got a job working for a tech education company as a technology instructor at a local private school — teaching kindergarten through eighth grade students the finer points of integrative technology. I have worked for that company ever since, eventually becoming a curriculum writer and professional development consultant. The main reason I explain all of that is to establish my somewhat unorthodox M.A. and post-M.A. experience. That said, I entered the grad program in 2009 and graduated in 2011. I applied for Cuesta’s adjunct pool shortly after graduating and was fortunate to get my first class in fall 2011.

Regarding favorites, I’m pretty entrenched in modernism (especially the brand that still possesses a tinge of Romantic memory): Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Joyce, Eliot, Porter, O’Connor, Lawrence, etc. I have a love/hate thing for the Victorians. Give me a good short story collection (Flannery O’Connor’s is a favorite), and I’m happy. Many more, of course.

As far as favorite courses, I enjoy teaching Critical Thinking. It was the first class I taught at Cuesta and has become something of a sweet spot for me.

Did you ever entertain the idea of pursuing a Ph.D. when you were at Cal Poly, or did you know you wanted to move into a career right after your M.A.?

Luke: I entertained the idea a few times, but I always came back to a place of equal pragmatism and dread. On a practical level, I wasn’t interested in relocating at the time, and since Ph.D. admission usually involves ending up wherever the academic arms are open, that was a problem. Also, I was eager to seek college employment as soon as possible since I had taken a couple years off between my bachelor’s and master’s degrees. And to be candid, Ph.D. programs scared me at the time. They still do.

What inspired you to go into teaching at a community college?

Luke: When I was 16 or 17, I took English 101 from Marc Garcia Martinez at Allan Hancock College. He was damn cool, knew his stuff, and seemed to genuinely care about his students. That class — and my community college
experience as a whole — sealed the deal for me. On a philosophical level, I love what community colleges represent (low-cost entry into academia, relatively egalitarian, community focused, and, for the most part, unpretentious). I realized over the course of my community college general education time that I wanted to end up in that academic and vocational context.

**What's it like working in the community college world? Pros? Cons?**

**Luke:** So here's the somewhat protracted scoop — not a clear-cut pros and cons list, but it might be helpful for those considering the life. As I mentioned before, I work full time for a tech education company and teach part time at Cuesta (usually a class each semester). The latter is certainly my passion, but the former keeps the boat afloat, as it were. I realized early on that it would be difficult — though perhaps not impossible — to make a career out of adjunct instructing: There's a lot of uncertainty that comes with the gig: waiting for one's "turn" in the rotation each semester for class selection and waiting a bit longer to see if any unstaffed classes remain as scraps for eager adjuncts. But there are certainly instructors who teach part time at Cuesta, Hancock and Cal Poly.
And that course load, all cobbled together, works for them. But as a young married guy interested in starting a family, I was hoping for a bit more certainty — health insurance, a steady paycheck, and all that boring stuff. So I’ve been doing it this way ... a class at a time, waiting, gaining experience, working another job, and enjoying the process. Ultimately, of course, I’d love to acquire the grail of all community college adjuncts: the full-time instructor position. But that’s at the end of a very part-time rainbow.

To balance out the practical issues/cons of community college work — the uncertainty, the waiting, etc. — there are a whole host of pros. The community college classroom space is substantially satisfying intellectually and pedagogically. Working with students in the early stages of their collegiate formation requires a willingness to, on a daily basis, passionately pitch (as well as teach) the importance of critical thinking, analysis and writing. And more often than not, students are willing to buy the pitch and engage in the process of the comp/lit classroom. The context affords the teacher who genuinely enjoys teaching a hospitable environment to hone the craft. I’ve encountered many of those teachery-teachers in Cuesta’s English Department. From the department chair to the full-timers who have evaluated me each semester — everyone has been superbly helpful, encouraging and focused on supporting student success.

Furthermore, and not to come off too cloyingly idealistic, it feels important teaching at a community college. It feels like it matters and like, on the good days, students are getting it and improving and listening and finding something new to think about. And that feels pretty darn awesome.

So when I add up what could be considered pros and weigh them against what could be considered cons (uncertainty, years of potential waiting for full-time employment, daily attempts to convince students that English/books/writing is still "a thing," etc.), I am wildly thankful to be teaching at a community college (specifically Cuesta).

How do you think your Cal Poly education prepared you for a career teaching at a community college?

Luke: The M.A. program at Cal Poly afforded me an academic community that showed me how dynamic and collaborative learning can be. In addition to taking classes from phenomenal teachers (and there were many), I learned from the members of my cohort on a regular basis. M.A. Exam study sessions, group presentations, and teaching demonstrations served to strengthen my competence and confidence in a way that, I’m sure, has aided me as a teacher.

Additionally, the program demanded a mental flexibility that has been an asset as I prepare to teach courses that I have never taught. The exhaustive (and often exhausting) breadth of material represented on the M.A. Exam required me to hold a vast array of
often-disparate content in (meaningful) tension for two years. Though I have probably forgotten way more morphological concepts (sorry, Dr. Rubba) and Dickensian tropes than I care to admit, the program and its capstone exam prepared me to teach from a place of broad subject familiarity.

**In your experience, what are the pros and cons of holding a Ph.D. versus not if you want to work in education, especially in the community college sphere?**

**Luke:** Well, I imagine it would feel pretty fancy to get a "lit_doc" vanity license plate. Also, there's that progressive mild insanity that I hear is quite normative for Ph.D. candidates; such insanity could definitely prove formidable — or at least entertaining — to first-year composition students. But this is all conjecture.

In seriousness, I think the pros and cons depend on the individual community college in question. At Cuesta, there are quite a few full-time instructors with master's degrees and quite a few with doctorates. One's likelihood of employment and teaching success does not seem to be dictated by the M.A./Ph.D. distinction. However, I know that this is not always the case at other institutions.

Giving credit where it is due, there is certainly something intellectually valuable.

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**Featured Grad Essay Titles**

"**Prostitution, Gold-digging and Impotency: Hemingway’s Fiesta of Sex**"

*Gareth White*

"**Affect Me: Teatime and Waiting for the Barbarians with Edgar Allan Poe and Edmund Burke**"

*Erin Escobar*

"**Preaching with Style(istics): Repetition, Present Tense Verb Use and Diction in Landon Schott’s Sermon ‘For No Reason’**"

*Erin Escobar*

"**Potent Disability: the Barbarian Girl in J.M. Coetzee’s ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’**"

*Daniela Schirmer*

"**Bawdy Bodies: The Function of Corporeality in ‘The Miller’s Tale’**"

*Daniela Schirmer*
honorable about pursuing one’s area of study to its peak. I benefitted greatly from the intimidatingly knowledgeable professors in the Cal Poly M.A. program (all of whom had Ph.D.s, of course). To this day, I regularly steal their teaching flourishes, methods and texts in my own classroom. But pragmatically speaking, most of the community college English classes offered are composition, critical thinking, and intro-to-lit in nature. As such, an M.A. like the one at Cal Poly sufficiently serves to prepare one to tackle this particular educational context.

Are you considering ever getting a Ph.D. in the future? Why or why not?

Luke: At the moment, as I tread the waters of adjunct employment, I don’t see myself getting a Ph.D. However, were I to be hired full-time at a community college, I would reconsider if it seemed that the additional schooling would better prepare me to help students.

If you could do it over again from the day you started in Cal Poly’s program to today in your professional career, what would you do differently? Any other advice for current M.A. students?

Luke: Since I was working nearly full-time while in the program, I did not take advantage of the T.A. opportunity for second-year students. I regret that. Teaching during one’s second year is such a large part of the program and would have, I imagine, made the transition into post-M.A. teaching a bit more seamless. Also, I would have stayed at Cal Poly another year to add on a teaching certificate or credential. It’s definitely worthwhile to have a master’s in English, but at times it feels as though you have only one or two professional options. Since I would have been willing to teach at the high-school level (at least for a while) or teach abroad, it would have been smart to hedge my bets, get it all out of the way, and then pursue whatever job opportunities arose.

Lastly, I would have nursed much less angst about paper lengths, assigned reading, the M.A. Exam, deadlines, etc. Being a student is relatively easy and enjoyable, as life stages go. Sitting around in a study room with six other weirdos ruminating about Joyce, trying to count the number of times the word "suck" appears in "A Portrait of the Artist" (I’m pretty sure it’s over 50) is kind of like play — strange brain-play or mental frolicking ... whatever it is, it should be enjoyed. It’s important to keep perspective — to remember that being a student in the M.A. program at Cal Poly is a damn sweet gig.

Any other observations or opinions about education and career stuff you’d like to share (like good study tips to prepare for the M.A. exam, perhaps, or job search and interview advice)?

Luke: As far as study tips, I would love to share what helped me. Hopefully parts of it will help current students. I re-
lied heavily on a massive Excel database I created early in my second year in the program. I recorded the titles of works, author names, descriptions of events that would bear mentioning in an essay, time periods, genres, key themes, tropes, and most importantly, connections to other works. The thing was massive, and I would leave it open during class in order to record anything that seemed relevant (relating to the reading list). Then in the months leading up to the M.A. Exam, I generated questions that could be answered by groupings of texts. On my commutes from Santa Maria to San Luis Obispo, I would rehearse answers to said questions. In addition to studying from that database, late night, semi-delirious conversations with other members of my cohort certainly helped me make sense of the texts on which my understanding was weak.

Now bear in mind that I took the exam a couple years ago, and it has probably evolved since then. But here’s what I would say to first- and second-year students (pardon the obvious): start studying for the exam today. Pick people who know a lot about the periods and authors you know nothing about; ask them many questions. Read for connections and how characters and movements fit into the larger structure, puzzle, tableau, etc. Create associations with the various authors and works (Swinburne the narcoleptic, O’Connor my Gothic-writer-crush-but-not-for-looks, you get the idea — it really helped me keep things straight). Go to any and all M.A. Exam period overviews offered by professors; after all, they will be reading your exams, so it might be helpful to get the CliffsNotes directly from them. And read as much of that grotesquely huge reading list as you possibly can. Oh, and remember that the program is designed to prepare you, so don’t freak out too much. It will all work out.

Do you have a funny or strange story/anecdote from when you were in school or from your time teaching at Cuesta that you’d like to share?

Luke: Well, still along the lines of M.A. Exam zaniness, I remember being woken up by my wife many a night leading up to the exam and being told that I was muttering about books in my sleep again. I think I was still rehearsing answers to hypothetical exam questions. When you study the texts so much, they invade your headspace in strange ways. I sleep a lot better now that I’m not in the program. But I must say, I often miss the camaraderie of my cohort, the intellectual sharpening facilitated by each class and each instructor, and the complete literature/criticism/composition saturation that characterized those two years. ■
ALUMNI Q&A: Helen Knight

January 2014

M.A.: December 2009
Now: Ph.D., Purdue University, Literary Studies (American literature to 1865)

A few items to familiarize our readers with you: Favorite authors? What is the best text you’ve read in the Ph.D. program? What you do when you are not studying, writing or teaching?

HELEN: One of the most interesting authors I’ve read recently is Leonora San-say. I wrote about her "Secret History" for my dissertation, but that book is also just a fascinating read (something that can’t be said for all early American novels!). Plus, she was likely the mistress of the notorious Aaron Burr and could have passed secret messages for him during the scandal that lead to his trial for treason. Scandalous indeed! When it comes to reading for pleasure, I like reading as an escape. I’ve been enjoying Stella Rimington’s spy novels recently. When I’m not working, I like to cook and spend time with friends. When the weather is good, I like hiking and running with my dog, and when it’s not, I turn to yoga and swimming (indoors of course). I’ve also recently taken up swing and blues dancing with the vibrant swing dance community here at Purdue.

Tell us about how you fell in love with early American literature.

HELEN: I’m not sure I fell in love with early American literature as much as I was like, "Whoa! This is totally crazy!" and that provoked my curiosity. It is that curiosity that drives my research, the appetite to understand the strange world of early America and the weird things that happen in its literature — things like Puritan writings emphasizing people suckling ministers’ breasts, characters spontaneously combusting, and scandalous spy narratives.

How did the M.A. program at Cal Poly prepare you for Ph.D. work? What, in your opinion, does it take to be a Ph.D. candidate?

HELEN: The M.A. at Cal Poly did an especially good job preparing me for teaching. I am also a strong close reader, thanks in a large part to all those years of instruction under the likes of Kevin Clark, Lisa Coffman and Carol Mac-Curdy, who emphasized paying close attention to the dynamics of a text and the subtleties of diction, syntax, tone and form.

It takes dedication and rigor to be in a doctoral program. It’s hard work and it can be very intimidating, even in a program as supportive as the one at
Purdue. ... [You also need an inherent quality] that keeps you going even when it seems like you really might not make it through and helps you believe in your work even when it seems no one else will.

**Anything you wished you had known prior to starting the Ph.D.?**

**Helen:** Hmm, not really. I feel like I learned what I needed to as I went along. I guess when I was applying, it would have been a good idea to actually read the most recent work of the scholars I was interested in working with. People’s projects change a lot over time, and I would have made smarter choices with my applications if I had realized that.

**Do you have a working title for your dissertation or a particular angle?**

**Helen:** My working title for the time being is "Erotic Dominance and Submission in the Early American Novel" ... but that’s it for now.
Tell us a little about yourself and your background: When did you graduate from Cal Poly’s English M.A. program?

What are some of your favorite authors, books and genres? What was your favorite course at Cal Poly?

STEPHEN: I graduated from Cal Poly in December 2009, but I try to get back to visit when I can. My favorite courses, as it turns out, were English 505 (Composition and Rhetoric Theory) and English 506 (Pedagogical Approaches to Composition) with Dr. Helmbrecht. I ultimately decided to pursue a doctorate in rhetoric and composition as a result of those courses. That’s not to say that there isn’t a special place in my heart for Dr. Allen’s 18th Century and Satire course, or the creative writing courses I took with Dr. Clark, but if I have to pick just one, the 505/506 sequence would be it (even though that’s two).

Currently you are pursuing a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Louisville. Tell us about the roots of this choice.

STEPHEN: I liked rhetoric and composition’s breadth, and as I read around, I became interested in ideas about democracy and education — especially how/whether education enables students to participate more fully in different kinds of political discourse.

Were you a T.A. at Cal Poly, and how did that prepare you for where you are now? Are you a T.A. or do you plan to become a T.A. at Louisville?

STEPHEN: Working in the Writing Center and as a T.A. really sparked an interest in teaching. Of course, I enjoy teaching itself immensely, but also thinking about teaching itself as worthy of study. I suppose that’s what initially led to my interest in rhetoric and composition. Before Cal Poly, I didn’t know that people were building this amazing body of work on how students learn to write, and what (consequently) might be some good ways to help them.

Any advice to current grads for passing the M.A. Exam? What was your study method/philosophy?

STEPHEN: I actually probably wouldn’t recommend my study method to anyone. Ever. It pretty much consisted of a frenzied reading of everything that I could think of that might be important. It was a terrible strategy, and I think I
might have done well to read through my course notes instead. Having taken the exam, I can say that what I saw as more important than an encyclopedic knowledge of all things English studies was an idea about how texts are connected. I think that in my more successful moments, I was able to explain how a given work or idea was situated within a tradition, and that proved to be the most important skill for the exam.

**How long after graduating did you wait to apply to Ph.D. programs, and how many programs did you apply to? How far along are you into the program at Louisville? What’s it like?**

**Stephen:** I waited about a year after graduating Cal Poly to put my applications together. I thought I would apply the same quarter I graduated, but there were just too many questions. I had a hard time leaving San Luis Obispo, and I wasn’t sure what else I might do that might keep me in California. I took a while to think about whether a doctorate was really what I wanted. I don’t remember exactly, but I think I applied to about eight programs. Louisville was pretty high on my list, so I was very excited when I got the news I’d been accepted here. I’m now nearing the end of my second year of study here, and it’s been a little intense. I have met and worked with some amazing people who have pushed me pretty hard. They have also been amazingly supportive and kind.

**Is there an area of focus, writer, scholar, topic or issue in your field that particularly excites you?**

**Stephen:** Right now, I’m focused on what I think of as an intersection between work in literacy studies by people like Bronwyn Williams, work in disability studies by people like Brenda Brueggemann, and work in publics and the public sphere by Michael Warner.

**What kind of expectations did you have about the Ph.D.? Is there any information you wish you had prior to initiating? And/or, in retrospect, have you realized anything or been enlightened about your experiences at Cal Poly?**

**Stephen:** I guess I expected things to somehow be very different. I don’t know in what way, but different. As it turns out, what I’ve learned is that my experience at Cal Poly prepared me very well for Ph.D. study; the close reading and analysis skills I practiced there are the same skills I call on now.

**What are your hopes for your future and career?**

**Stephen:** Let’s just say ... keep me posted if there are any faculty openings at Cal Poly. Really, my dream is a job at a teaching institution where I can use the knowledge that I’m building here to benefit students.
TIM FARRELL (fall '13): For his misdeeds and even worse thoughts, Farrell has been sentenced to teach English 101 at the Lompoc Federal Prison, through Allan Hancock College. However, he has been behaving reasonably well, so he’s been paroled: Farrell has been offered a class in the fall at Hancock’s Lompoc campus.

SUSIE KOPECKY (spring '13): Kopecky is teaching basic skills and freshman composition at Cuesta College and finishing her master's in library and information science. She is, of course, balancing these joyous opportunities with her full-time job of being awesome.

MORGAN LIVINGSTON (spring '13): Livingston is currently living in beautiful San Luis Obispo; she just couldn’t leave! She is thankful to report that she is teaching her third quarter at Cal Poly as a lecturer in the English Department.

BEK MAPLES (spring '13): Maples has been working at Cal Poly as a lecturer teaching composition and argumentation since graduating last spring. She’s also training for the Vineman Aquabike and otherwise enjoying the perpetually wonderful weather here in San Luis Obispo.

EMILY OLSON (spring '13): Olson is currently teaching basic English and college writing part time at Cuesta College and looking to apply as a lecturer for Cal Poly’s English Department come fall 2014.

ERIKA (PEDERSEN) PRUETT (spring '13): Since completing the M.A. program, Pruett got married and started her own graphic and Web design business. She is living in San Luis Obispo and loving life on the Central Coast.

MISSY STEIN (spring '13): Stein started her own women’s board game company called Blissful Board Games. Her first game, "Blushing Bride," is now on the market. Currently, she
works full time as a technical writer at Procore Technologies, a cloud-based construction project management software company.

**Erin Galeria** (fall '12): Galeria married her best friend, Ben, in June and in August moved to Sacramento to be closer to family and to pursue new jobs. In early April they bought and moved into their first home. She is currently teaching 10th grade honors English as well as 11th grade English at Antelope High School and is loving the school and the students.

**Erin Holzer** (fall '12): Holzer moved to the Bay Area in August 2013 to accept a position with Diablo Valley College. She teaches courses centered on reading, writing, critical thinking, and American literature and film.

**Jack Lindgren** (fall '12): After graduating, Lindgren moved to Los Angeles, where he worked for a film festival and PR firm doing copy writing and editing. He recently moved to the Bay Area, where he is working in a similar capacity at a law office. He is currently reading Terry Eagleton, Joan Didion, and "Dune."

**Mariko (Fujii) Kriege** (spring '12): Since finishing at Cal Poly, Kriege has been working as a technical writer for a software company in San Luis Obispo. She got married in August 2013 and is enjoying the SLO life!

**Megan Lancaster** (spring '12): Lancaster loves spending time with her husband, Matt, and their beautiful baby girl, Lucille (4 months old). She continues to enjoy her work as a lecturer in Cal Poly’s English Department.

**Carli Sinclair** (spring '12): Sinclair is finishing up her first year of Ph.D. work at the University of Missouri, where she’s focusing on late 19th-century American literature, regionalist writers, and space and place. She’s also working on a graduate minor in women and gender studies and teaching composition in her spare time (and missing the California weather).

**Casey Woods** (spring '12): Woods is teaching English and general life lessons at Apple Valley High School in her hometown. She gets the pleasure of teaching freshmen on their way into high school and seniors on their way out.

**Jessica Davis** (fall '11): Davis lives in San Luis Obispo and is currently finishing her first year teaching 10th and 11th grade English at Paso Robles High School.
Brinn Strange (fall '11): When not competing in triathlons, Strange works as an English instructor at the University of Southern Mississippi as part of the institution’s Expanded Program, where students have the opportunity to take English 101 over two semesters alongside a studio-style supplementary course, based on ACT scores. This semester she is also participating in a service-learning seminar, and she has been incorporating service-learning practices into her English 102-honors curriculum; next month, her students will help in hosting the university’s annual Pow Wow by teaching elementary school children about Native American customs and by leading them on a scavenger hunt around the university’s medicine garden.

Kyle Kamaiopili (spring '11): Kamaiopili is currently in his second year in the English Ph.D. program at Tufts University, studying for his comprehensive examination (which is more or less an oral version of Cal Poly’s M.A. Exam, so he’s well prepared!) and beginning work on his dissertation. His focus is on anti-Colonial American literature and indigenous studies (mid-20th century to contemporary), and he works with Native American, Afro-Caribbean and Oceanic writers. He’s enjoying everything about the Boston area except for the weather. He is also running the Graduate Humanities Conference at Tufts (tuftsgradhumanitiesconference.wordpress.com/2014-cfp/).

Lizzy Gilbert (spring '10): Gilbert is still teaching English at two large companies, Roche Diagnostics and Berlitz GmbH, in Germany. She is living in Heidelberg and has been enjoying reading outside in the warm spring weather amongst the blossoming trees.

Chelsea Lynn (spring '10): This year, Lynn is throwing herself into a creative writing project. Research and writing consume her free time and she couldn’t be happier.

Alissa Magorian (spring '10): In November 2013, Magorian presented her paper, titled "(En)Gendered Space in Henry James’s The Portrait of a Lady," at the Henry James Society panel during the Midwestern MLA
Conference. She is also writing a novel about two young women thrown together by a family tragedy, and the strange workings of grief and love wrought by their mutual loss.

**Michelle Whipple (spring '10):** Whipple lives in Santa Margarita with her husband, Frank. She enjoys her job as mother to their two daughters, Anna Berry (2) and Rose Ellen (7 months).

**Helen Knight (fall '09):** Knight is working on her doctoral dissertation, tentatively titled "The Satisfaction of Torment: Erotic Dominance and Submission in the Early American Novel," under Dr. Christopher Lukasik at Purdue University. She has had the pleasure of teaching a 200-level Great American Books class for the past year and will be teaching it again in the fall. She also serves as the president of Purdue’s Early Atlantic Reading Group.

**Sarah Grieve (spring '07):** Grieve is a Ph.D. candidate in American literature at Arizona State University. Her dissertation focuses on mid-century American women poets and their depictions of environmental injustice. She will graduate in May 2015. She also coaches high school basketball in Gilbert, Ariz.