English AT CORNELL
A NEWSLETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
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The Star that waits for your eyes only

An Interview with Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon

This issue of English at Cornell *begins with an article in a continuing series in which Cornell faculty members address the place of the humanities at Cornell and in the world at large. Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon has a rich set of perspectives on this question. An African American poet who grew up in rural Florida, she received her MFA degree from Pennsylvania State University and joined the Cornell Department of English in 2004 as an assistant professor. Her first book,* Black Swan *(University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), won the Cave Canem Poetry Prize in 2001; she is now at work on a second volume, tentatively titled* Open Interval. *She has taught creative writing to Ivy League undergraduates and to inmates of maximum security prisons and juvenile detention centers. Last spring she and Helena Viramontes taught a course in Cornell at Auburn, a program for inmates at Auburn Correctional Facility, thirty-eight miles north of Ithaca. The program was founded by Pete Wetherbee after New York State terminated the higher education degree program for inmates in its prison system.*

In this interview Lyrae and Paul Sawyer discuss identity as a site of location and intersection, in relation to one's past, one's race, one's vocation, one's students, and finally to poetry itself.

P. *Black Swan,* your first book, addresses, among other things, your experiences growing up and your mother's life. Could you say a bit about her and your childhood and how you wrote about them?

L. I'm a Southern girl, Daytona Beach. Born and raised there, moved to a small town thirty miles inland. My father died when I was six, so for most of my life I was raised by my mother as a single parent. She raised me and three siblings in the Pentecostal Church, which is a hard-core, restrictive, Old-Testament-God religion. She'd been diagnosed with hyperthyroidism and was about to die, and she essentially made a deal with God that if He let her live to raise her kids, she'd be a real Christian. The doctors told my mother, "You're going to die," and the family gathered to mourn her, but instead, she left the hospital and did not die and lived up until 2000—which was kind of a miracle at the time. I address that in *Black Swan* in a poem called "Myth." So. Yeah. A lot of *Black Swan* is addressed to her and to that religion, and also to classical mythological religion as well as Biblical religion.

P. How did your mother's life remind you of classical mythology?

L. In my poems I'm always focused in on identity, on the stories we tell ourselves. My mother was not very forthcoming with stories that predated that conversion; she essentially wanted to eliminate all her previous life, so she'd really not talk to you about much except Jesus. I'm trying to deal with her being larger than life to me because of her having overcome her illness. The way they treated hyperthyroidism was with cobalt radiation, as if it were cancer, so my whole life, my mother was sick but also superstrong and powerful and safe and a larger-than-life character. So the women of classical myths went right along with the way I viewed her and myself. *Black Swan* starts with Leda and ends with Helen. The Leda story in the first poem is my mother's. For me the poems are a way of viewing my own identity by pulling away from my mother's insistence on everything through the Bible.

P. In the last poem, where you balance yourself against your mother, who is in the first poem, Helen is looking in a refracting bathroom mirror, and the image is fragmented. You don't give your reader the satisfaction of seeing *your* identity as an achieved whole.

L. No, and that leads directly into the new book; the fragmentation of constellations represents that too. Looking at sky and not being able to see the whole that's there, because it's invisible.

P. The lack of wholeness is not a completely negative condition, though?

L. No, no. But the invisibility is a problem, and that's what I'm trying to deal with. Also the fragmentation. The "I" is a site of crossing, a site of intersection, a palimpsest "I" being written on in all these different ways, the ways the stars are layered. If this is the human condition, you can deal with it or not, but you can also try to fight the invisibility. I sometimes refer to blackness as a "magical skin," because there are these ways of seeing that are allowed through having it—ways of seeing that are engendered by invisibility.

P. You told me once that you always knew you were a poet.

L. My name refers to "lyric poetry." Which is very bizarre. I don't think my mother, in naming me, intentionally meant to say, "You're going to be a poet." But I can't remember a time when I didn't want to write poems. My desire to write poems pre-dates my earliest memories. I don't know why that is. I remember being in elementary school and hearing a poem I'd written being read over the intercom—which was the first time I thought of poetry as a public thing as well as a private thing. And then with the Pentecostal religion also—it's hard *not* to be a poet when you're raised to believe in a world that's spoken: "In the beginning was the Word." Which is how I was raised. Creation was "God said let there be." How can you *not* write poetry?

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P. "Pentecostal," of course, refers to the episode when the divine flames descended, giving speech to disciples.

L. Yes. Which meant they believed in a language that's a direct line to God. A language also that maybe the person who's speaking it can't even understand. Speaking in foreign tongues, a language you don't even know—it's that glossolalia aspect that's interesting: wrestling with words and trying to make meaning, creating and designing things, making poems in particular. I take the process very seriously; it takes a long time.

P. What poets or poems have been important to you?

L. June Jordan's "Poem about My Rights" is one of my all-time favorite poems; it ends, "I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name/My name is my own my own my own." That was so freeing when I first read it.

When I was really young, my mom went to a library sale and got records of all of Shakespeare's plays, along with the books to go with them. So when other kids were listening to Stevie Wonder, I was listening to Shakespeare on the record player and reading along. Half the time I didn't understand what they were saying but I loved it, the way it sounded, the way it made me feel when I heard it. So I was a really strange kid. I also grew into a great fan of Emily Dickinson. And Lucille Clifton, whose stuff I just love. Those are poems that saved me as far as coming from an abused background, as I was. But Clifton was also writing and re-writing mythologies. She has these conversations between Lucifer and God as brothers talking to each other—a different re-telling of the Biblical mythology. And she has a poem, "Leda II; A Note Regarding Visitations," that begins, "Always pyrotechnics," and where Leda is addressing the swan: "you want what a man wants/Next time come as a man/Or don't come at all."

P. I notice you're carrying a book about the stars. What does astronomy have to do with the poems you're working on now?

L. I'm reading Horace A. Smith's *RR Lyrae Stars* because I am writing about these stars and about myself as a way to get at identity from a different angle. Variable stars are stars that expand and contract, changing in brightness in a way that's regular, that can be measured—and also seen with the naked eye. They're important stars because the variable rays make them useful for traveling distances. I'm interested in the RR Lyrae type of variable star because they have my name but they also have that RR designation. It's a way of naming things in astronomy, but I also think of "RR" as railroad crossings, sites of intersection, X marks the spot, which is where identity lies. So I thought "RR" was interesting metaphorically, because identity lies in intersection.

Another way the new poems link to astronomy is that I've become interested in John Goodricke. He was a deaf astronomer, living in the eighteenth century, which was a time when the deaf were not generally educated. He lived across from York Minster, and he made observations of the stars and calculations that led to discoveries by later astronomers. He studied variable stars, including Algol and BetaLyrae stars. Because he was a son and heir and also deaf, he was a great disappointment to his family, so even though he's the most famous person in his family, he wasn't even buried in the family monument; he's buried off somewhere else. So he was both an astronomer and an outsider.

P. Do you write about Goodricke in the new book?

L. Yes. The first poem where you get a sense of him is called "RR Lyrae Sonnet." I was thinking of a way of translating the astronomy to the poetry, and I thought the sonnet form would be good.

P. Why the sonnet in particular?

L. Because of its ability, in my mind, to expand and hold things. I have a number of favorite sonnets, by Shakespeare and others, but my very favorite sonnet is by Marilyn Nelson. It's called "Balance," and it starts off using the vernacular: "He watch her like a coon hound watch a tree." It's about a woman in slave times and her relationship with a slave master, and I loved the way the form opened up to embrace that vernacular along with a particular form and meter. A sonnet can contain Shakespearean language or any language you want to put into it; you can also write yourself into the form and against it. In *Black Swan* I have a poem about child abuse that's written as a pantoum. I love formal poetry, and I love getting away from it; there's something comforting in the music of it, the rhythm, the patterns, the chaos. Constellations. This is too big for me to figure out, so put pictures up there in the sky.

P. Can you explain the title of the new book?

L. "Open interval" is a term from mathematics. If you have a line that doesn't contain its end-points but goes from one point to another, it's designated by a line with two open circles at the end. I think of life as an open interval and the universe as an open interval, and also faith. And I think of the sonnet as an open interval. So the sonnet has room for anything. Not only can you write yourself into and against the form, but you can write yourself straight through to another place.

"RR Lyrae Sonnet" has an open interval marked within it. Another way of designating these intervals is by brackets that face out instead of in. In the sonnet, I address John Goodricke about the fact that he's written my name down—I looked at his journals and found my name there, "Lyrae," written in his hand. And then I address "dear Phillis" in an interval. I'm addressing Phillis Wheatley, the black American poet, because although I feel connected to Goodricke through my name, Phillis Wheatley was a black American poet. And you know, Thomas Jefferson said there's no such thing as a black American poet: "You can't exist." So I'm trying to write to Goodricke and Wheatley but write through the space—and write myself into a different universe.

P. Your mention of Wheatley reminds me that we seem to be at a point in literary history when a "minority" poet is free to explore any topic. She isn't thought to violate some notion of fidelity to her "roots" if, for example, she writes about an eighteenth-century Englishman who was deaf.

L. I address race in some of the other poems. For example, there's one about Andromeda—the

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constellation and the myth behind it—which posits her as a black woman. Which in fact she was: she was North African. So it's bizarre how in paintings she's shown as a virginal white nude with the chains—which of course are provocative in terms of race and history.

Another thing that has been interesting to me is, I've been studying celestial maps and how this intersects with race. I spent last summer in London, visiting the Royal Astronomical Society. No one comes in there, especially not poets. I learned that it was a hundred fifty years before a celestial map came out where the celestial background was black. Black was not even allowed in the night sky. Here were these maps where the night sky was white.

P. So instead of putting African American experience against a white Western tradition, you're complicating that view of a Western tradition, which has had a white tint, so to speak, but is not in itself white: Andromeda is not "white," astronomy is not "white," the stars are not "white."

L. Part of my project is to claim everything for myself—I'm greedy. That includes John Goodricke; there's my name written down there [in his journals]; he's no less mine than somebody else's that's looking at him. Why can't I have him, why can't I have the star and the entire universe as a black woman poet, why must I be relegated to, "My roots are X"? But I'm different and interested in a different "X"—

P. So you don't call yourself a "minority poet" very often.

L. No. I don't call myself "minority" these days.

P. You've written a poem about one of my favorite musicians, Jimi Hendrix *[see sidebar, page 7]*. What's going on in that one?

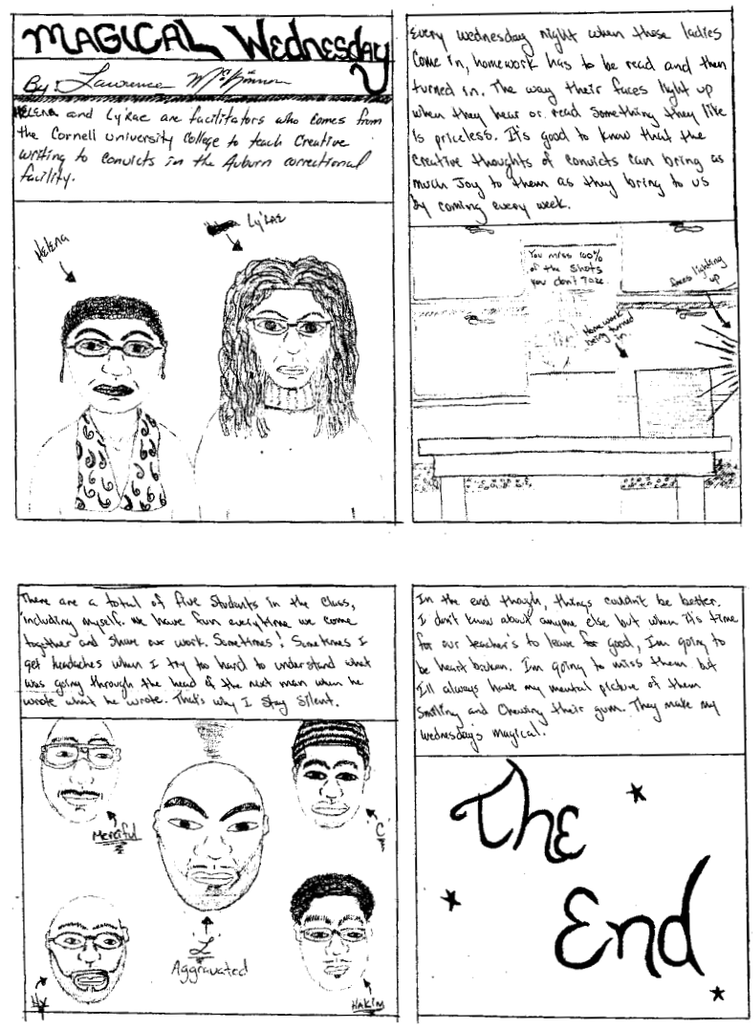
L. A lot of the poems in my manuscript rely on the cliché "shooting for the stars," which I use to refer to freedom as a concept derived from the stars, identity as a concept derived from the stars. You may know that during the Vietnam War Hendrix trained as a paratrooper, but he got hurt during training and had to leave. With his guitar, he was trying to re-create the sound of the wind blowing through the silk of parachutes. I grew up near Skydive DeLand, a drop zone where skydivers trained, and I used to watch the airmen jumping out of planes. Hendrix was trying to get at the sky through the guitar, at that tremendous feeling of falling through the air in a parachute. Art is one way of doing it, and for him of course drugs were another way.

P. I recall that Hendrix used to complain that he couldn't reproduce on the guitar the sounds he could hear in his head.

L. That's the wind. A lot of his work with distortion and feedback came from his trying to re-create that sound. I was also interested in the way Hendrix seemed to be pouring himself through the guitar, trying to locate himself, the desperation people feel trying to locate themselves.

In the phrase "midnight flares," I have in mind the way stars flash, but also an early way of navigation. Before they figured out longitude, sailors would set out flares in the darkness. While I was in England I learned about these early attempts. One was really a form of vodun, not science. There was a substance called "powder of sympathy" that people thought could link at a distance. So they'd injure a dog by stabbing it through a bandage, and keep the bandage but send the dog to sea. Every midday back home, they'd plunge the knife into the powder-soaked bandage, and because they believed that the dog was linked to it in "sympathy" through its injury, the dog would supposedly howl from pain. That way the navigators could locate themselves in relation to the land.

P. You write poems and you also teach others to write poems. What's been your most valuable experience as a teacher?



L. That would have to be my experience teaching the girls at Girls' Probation House in Fairfax, Virginia. For three years before then, I taught a workshop at Rockville State Correctional Facility while I was a graduate student, and I realized then how much I enjoyed teaching incarcerated populations. I wanted to do this for the rest of my life. But at Fairfax, I was actually part of the girls' treatment team; I was responsible for teaching English, social studies, and art. I had girls from ages twelve to nineteen all at the same time, like a one-room schoolhouse.

I remember trying to teach the girls meter. We read the song "Lose Yourself," by Eminem, which is from the movie *Eight Mile*; I taught them that Eminem knew about meter, that meter's not just something "out there"—there's a part in the song where he even lays out the beat (DAD-dum-da-dum-DAD). I told them, Don't think ignorance will get you to the top of the field you want. I was very open with them about my own experiences. I came up hard too, I had bad things happen to me, and they appreciated that I shared that with them. I think it made them trust me more than they might have.

P. Why did you leave?

L. Because of the No Child Left Behind Act. Because of their regulations, I wasn't qualified to teach in the program.

P. So *you* got left behind.

L. Right.

P. Since you came to Cornell, you've been teaching at Auburn Correctional Facility in upstate New York. How would you compare that experience with teaching the girls at Fairfax?

L. Nothing could be as enjoyable as teaching the girls. I feel so fortunate even to have been part of that program. And the closeness that developed with the kids. Of course I can't allow myself that now; I have to keep better boundaries at Auburn, particularly as a woman going into a maximum security prison.

What's been most rewarding about Auburn is how talented the men are. They were resistant at first to any idea of craft, anything that could be seen as a form belonging to "the Man." You know, whatever comes out at first is supposed to be good. I used to give them the example of jazz musicians riffing. I kept joking about pearls in the oyster; I'd say, "I'm here to annoy you—and you'll create something beautiful as a result." And then to watch them try these forms and see such fantastic results! *["Magical Wednesday," above]*

P. You've written a poem about Auburn called "North Star," which we can't print all of because it's forthcoming from *Shenandoah.* But you can describe it and quote from it.

L. Yes. On the way to the prison I would drive past Harriet Tubman's house in Auburn, and I'd think of what a star meant to me and what it meant to her. I have the freedom and privilege to sit and contemplate what a star means to me in terms of identity. I'm a black woman who can't find the

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"A Whale-Oiled Machine"

Michele Mannella* [left], *the newest staff member, with Robin Doxtater and Vicky Brevetti, who between them have worked forty-five years for Cornell

Last spring, a visiting professor wrote a letter to Marianne Marsh, the administrative manager of the Department of English, that begins: "I wanted to let you know that the English Department staff at Cornell has been the most pleasant and cooperative support staff that I have worked with in my graduate and professional career. . . . The atmosphere is friendly and open, and that has made my campus life and my job easier." For those of us who have worked with the staff for even a short time, either as students or as faculty members, this praise comes as no surprise: their efficiency, integrity, and sheer human qualities have made them seem colleagues and friends rather than simply "staff." Recently, all six met with Jen Dunnaway, a graduate student in English who was also the research assistant for this issue of the newsletter. The conversation touched on the women's relationship to the faculty and students, to their work, and above all, to each other.

MARIANNE MARSH, the administrative manager, has worked for the English Department for twenty-four years. That record is trumped, however, by VICKY BREVETTI, the assistant to the chair of the department, who received her twenty-five-year certificate last June. ROBIN DOXTATER, who handles research accounts and other financial matters, and DARLENE FLINT, administrative assistant for the undergraduate program, work in the main office. The newest members are HEATHER GOWE, whose sunny smile greets visitors at the front desk, and MICHELE MANNELLA, who assists the director of graduate studies.

Marianne began the conversation by noting that departments of this size (more than fifty faculty members and 300 courses) aren't just "chaired" anymore, they're managed. What does it mean to be the "non-academic chair" of an operation of this size? "I manage the TA budget, and I help the chair make curriculum planning decisions," Marianne explained. "I don't make the academic decisions, but I know what a lot of them need to be. I supervise the staff, I take care of the facilities—all those things that are kind of invisible, that just get done. We all contribute to this, but I oversee that it gets done."

Vicky noted that one of the hardest parts is transitioning to a new chair, since the staff has a continuity that no faculty officer has. As Michele put it, the staff has to be able to say each year, "It's September 12, it's the time to do XYZ." Not surprisingly, in a department of this complexity, some decisions "just happen." "In smaller departments, the whole faculty might get involved in the decision-making regarding a new copy machine," Marianne pointed out. "Here, the new copy machine just shows up. Then the chair goes in there and says, 'Oh! A new copy machine. Can you show me how to work it?'"

But the work the staff does only *seems* to "just happen." For example, Vicky coordinates the entire tenure process and review process for anybody who's getting promoted. "She knows *everything* that has to be done, the deadlines, everything, and she is absolutely meticulous about it," Marianne said. "The grad students may see her as just the paycheck-generator, but no. Because to get one paycheck, one little thin piece of paper, there's probably that much stuff she has to do *[hands wide]* for one person."

Similarly, when Darlene reserves a classroom for someone, she has to enter certain codes for buildings, and then certain codes for what is needed in the classroom. For example, a room with moveable seating has its own code. This year the College of Arts and Sciences got a surprising influx of new students—all needing courses and classrooms. "There're about thirty classes right now that, between me and the registrar, hopefully by the time classes start, we'll have them all placed," Darlene said. Much of her job, though, doesn't relate to undergraduates. As Marianne pointed out, "She coordinates all of the applications for faculty searches. She takes care of all the key assignments for graduate TA offices and the faculty. She makes massive updates to our website on a regular basis; she posts all the courses. That's how it works with us: there's so much to be done and there're only a few of us, so we have to say, well, *you* can do that, *you* can do that, *you* can do that."

"Our joke is that we're 'a whale-oiled machine,'" Darlene said. "For example, we can set up a reception in no time flat, we've done it so many times."

This level of responsibility means that the staff members have to work together with a rare degree of consensus—which contributes to the atmosphere the visiting professor mentioned in her letter. "Sometimes we can just look at each other, and know what the other one wants us to do," Marianne said. "Or we'll just point, and Heather knows what I mean about 'you know.' We are a team here that gives off an impression that this is a community. Because we *are* a community in and of ourselves.

"But we consider the English Department our community as well," she added. "I've gotten to know people so well that I even organize memorial services for people who pass away, with a knowledge of them and their family. It's a talent I've developed sort of by accident. And we've all developed talents to know what to do with people because we know them so well."

Similarly, Robin Doxtater knows how someone's going to behave when they're paying a bill or using their card. "We even know their handwriting," she explained.

Vicky added: "And their footsteps."

What about the difficult cases? Are there some people who are harder to work with than others?

Marianne said, "You may have heard this ratio that's used in business, that 80% of your time is spent on 20% of the people."

"And because they're academics, they use more words to ask you for it," Michele joked.

"Yeah, like, 'save me,'" said Heather.

But for Marianne, there's an "up" side even to dealing with the difficult people. "You have all these people to put up with, but then you know them so well, that, for example, if professor so-and-so yelled at me about something, I know what's up with him. I've known what's up with him for the last fifteen years, and I know it's not about me. So, I don't take it personally. The thick skin sometimes comes from years of being here or getting to know people. And, you know, you kind of love 'em. Like you would a family member, because you know what they're up against and why they might be stressed out that day."

Michele said, "Because I'm new, if I'm working with something that's sensitive, I'll go in and I'll ask Marianne, 'How do you think I should handle this with this person?' And the answer will be different for different people."

Vicky has a particular talent for dealing with "sensitives" because, according to Marianne, she's so discreet: "All kinds of wacky calls can come into the chair's office, and Vicky has to screen those, and figure out whether to respond to them, whether to direct them on or whether to ignore them. Because sometimes people begin *[commanding voice]* "I'm talking to the chair!"

Darlene Flint* [left] *and Heather Gowe with Marianne Marsh, administrative manager of the English Department

What have been some of the wackiest phone calls? Marianne recalled a woman from New Jersey, a paranoid schizophrenic, who used to call the director of graduate studies: "She had this whole thing about how she was channeling messages through her retina through people in the basement of Rockefeller Center. She called it the 'conductivity.' She really needed to talk to English literature professors about this, and would actually come to Ithaca, probably when they let her out of the mental institution. And people used to patiently talk to her."

Darlene had a different example: "There's been a guy in here several times wanting to talk to somebody on the creative writing faculty about getting his book published. It's always interesting too when you get a phone call and somebody says, 'Okay, is *this* the word I use, or is it *this* word?' 'Oh, I don't know.' 'Well aren't you the English Department?'"

"Yeah. Well, we're not the reference at the library," Michele rejoined.

> "We are a team here that gives off an impression that this is a community. Because we *are* a community in and of ourselves."

Clearly, answering calls like this is no one's favorite part of the job. So what *are* the staff members' favorite aspects of the job—besides each other?

Vicky, who drives in each morning from Homer, New York, answered, "Not the commute."

"That doesn't bother me," said Darlene, who drives in from the town of Marathon, somewhat closer. "It's a time to sort of settle down between work and home."

Michele said, "My first favorite thing is that I'm getting paid for a job I like to do, and the second thing would be the people."

For Darlene, it's the variety: "I worked in a factory for a long, long time and it was very boring and repetitious. You did the same thing all day long. But here, various people are coming in, with different problems that you have to solve, and it keeps me interested." At the factory, her job had been to put pieces of decorative tape on tennis rackets to make them pretty, and then to spray paint them with varnish. "Then they shut the plant down and they sent everything to Costa Rica. So I went and spent a year and a half at a community college and then six months out of work, and then came here. The money [at the factory] was great. About twenty-five years ago I was making $13 an hour."

But she'd never go back.

Robin said, "Every so often I'll hear a horror story from another person that works here. Like how in their department there's backstabbing and there're awful professors. I'm so glad that we don't have any of that here."

"As I was thinking what is of value to me for being here, it *is* the community," Marianne continued, "and it's the fact that we are valued, not just as human beings but for what we do. They respect what we do. There are some people who are elitist and the academic/staff divide is important to them, but that's mostly about their own insecurities." She recalled an occasion when a faculty member who'd been in the English Department a long time was talking with her after a reception. "I'll never forget: the way he was talking to me, and dealing with the event that we were putting on, and suddenly, I felt like I had tenure. I felt like I was just as much a part of this department and this university as he was. And that was really important to me. That I felt so secure here, and that what I did was really important. And it is; what we do *is* really important."

Is it just luck that the English Department faculty members aren't automatically disrespectful?

After a moment's thought, Marianne said, "I think it's the English Department culture. I think people are hired according to those kinds of requirements. It's not in the job description for a new faculty member, but I think they must intuit it somehow. And then what we exude as a team must have a lot to do with it too."

"They know we're a team," Vicky said.

"They're not going to come in and talk to me about Marianne or Vicky," Michele agreed. "It's just not going to happen."

"Marianne has made it really nice to work here," Robin said. "She's been really flexible with us if we've needed time off. And she lets us do wellness. A lot of managers don't let their employees do wellness, to go to the gym and get release time."

The staff members have that benefit because Marianne knows they won't slack off: "I don't have absenteeism. Darlene said the other day—it was about somebody in another department who called in sick when something was happening—she said, 'Wow. I'd have to be dead or dying not to show up for something like that.'"

"There was one time this year when I was sick all night long," Darlene recalled, "but there was a reason for me to be in here. And I stayed at my desk and I said, 'Stay away from me,' and I did leave a little bit early. But it was one of those things where I knew that I had to be here because"—she shrugged—"it was the first day of classes."

"She can't *not* be here!" Marianne exclaimed, to laughter, "or I'd kill her!"

"That would be a case where she'd kill me and not fire me," said Darlene.

The staff has a joke about being fired—as Michele discovered during one of her first days on the job: "They have all these rules and they don't tell you, when you're new. So Marianne said one day, 'You're fired,' and I said, 'Oh good, I guess I can go home now,' and everyone says, 'Oh, she doesn't know the *rule*!'"

The rule, of course, is that the "fired" person has to stay until 4:30 and come back the next day.

Then there's the staff's way of rescuing another person who's trapped on the phone: "We have an unwritten rule that you 'rescue' the person," Marianne explained. "For example, you call the chair and say, *[breathless secretary voice]* 'Hi, Jonathan, your 10:30's here!' Another rule is, if a staff member has to talk to one of those people, when you hang up, you can say, 'I get to go home now.'"

One day Darlene got three such calls. "She got a sabbatical," Vicky quipped.

How does one build a staff with this much teamwork and common caring?

Marianne recalled saying when Michele came for her employment interview, "I want to hire a Vicky or a Robin."

Michele's first strong impression of the staff came after the gift exchange last Christmas: "Because everyone knows each other so well, the gifts were *dead on*. The gifts aren't just like someone saying, 'I'm gonna run into Wal-Mart and buy something for somebody.' With the gifts each of us got from

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the person we had in the exchange, you could tell, 'The person *knows* me.' And that was like my biggest impression. I've worked in a lot of different places, and that's not always the case."

Marianne then read and commented on some questions asked of applicants for new staff positions: "*How do you feel about the academic/staff divide?* Sometimes academics act like we're low-class and that they're smarter than we are. Most of them don't, but it does happen. *Do you have opportunities in your current or past environments to get goofy? It's important in our work environment that we mix serious work with laughter and lightness.* It's totally true. *What's your comfort level with a grad student who comes in in tears? What kinds of things at work make you grumpy or irritated? What would you do if your co-worker came and complained to you about another co-worker?*"

How did Michele answer the last one, Jen wanted to know.

"I probably said I would listen to it, and tell them to go talk to the person themselves."

"Ding! Ding! Ding!" said Heather, imitating the "right answer" sound on a quiz show.

The last question for the job interview was, "We want to get to know you a little bit in real life. Do you have any hobbies?"

"Quilting!" said Michele, to laughter.

"Some of us do it, but it's not exactly a requirement," Marianne explained dryly.

"There were only a couple of us quilters when Michele was hired," said Darlene, whose lovely work occasionally graces the partition in front of her desk. "Now there's a wannabe, and one that does it sometimes."

But quilting is not the only secret hobby in the office. Robin said hers is chasing after her children: "I'm working full-time and then going home and trying to do all that. The older ones tell you, 'We're going here tonight and here tonight, both at the same time, and then tomorrow night we're going in thirty-nine different directions.'"

Darlene, in fact, is the only staff member currently without young children, and so she willingly substitutes for others—for which she has been nicknamed "the doormat."

"Vicky's secret hobby is exercise," Marianne put in. "I hear she does it seven days a week. So she doesn't have to feel guilty for putting her feet up and watching the Yankees game!"

It was apparently Darlene who discovered that Jonathan Culler, the acting chair, also has a secret hobby. "I told him about the demo derby at the Whitney Point fair. He was hooked on it. I'm from sort of a blue-collar background, and when I first came to Cornell, it was interesting to figure out that these people with PhDs are actually like the rest of the world. I even met a faculty member who loved *wrestling.*"

When the conversation was nearly finished, Marianne revised her choice of favorite aspect of her job: "It's the fact that we laugh so much. I saw a really sad factoid the other day, that adults laugh 5 times a day and kids laugh 120 times a day. That's not true about us."

We have to," said Heather. "We *have* to laugh."

NEW FACULTY Members

Anne-Lise Francois joined the English Department this year as a visiting associate professor from Berkeley and is now, to our good fortune, a regular member of the faculty. A Yale graduate, she received the PhD degree from Princeton in 1999, when she also won the Clauss Memorial Prize for Dissertation in Comparative Literature. She specializes in Romantic literature, with interests in aesthetic and critical theory, the psychological novel, and ecocriticism. Her book *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (forthcoming from Stanford University Press) is a set of subtle, challenging, elegantly written and conceived essays on Austen, Wordsworth, and others, about the value of quiet, or as her subtitle puts it, "uncounted," moments in human experience as opposed to the sublime or dramatic revelations for which Romantic writers are so well known. She also writes on contemporary literature and culture. Her essay "Fashion as Compulsive Artifice" appeared in 2000 in the anthology *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture.* Her most recent essay, "'O Happy Living Things': Frankenfoods and the Bounds of Wordsworthian Natural Piety" (forthcoming in *Diacritics*), is a consummate example of her approach to ecocriticism.

Samantha Zacher, assistant professor of English, came to Cornell after teaching for two years at Vassar, her alma mater. She graduated in 1995 and received the PhD degree in English from the University of Toronto in 2003. She teaches Old English literature, with a special interest in prose homilies and the tradition of Old English Biblical commentary; her many general interests include Middle English, the history of the English language, manuscript studies, rhetoric, and the study of orality and writing. She has co-edited, with Andy Orchard, the collection *New Readings on the Vercelli Book* (forthcoming from Toronto), and her monograph *The Style and Rhetoric of the Vercelli Homilies* will appear in the Toronto Old English Series. In her writing she combines scholarly rigor with a clear ability to convey the literary and emotional power of any text she reads. Her work on the Old English sermons of the Vercelli manuscript—neglected until quite recent times—is lively and accessible to non-specialists. Her interest in rhetoric extends to careful thinking about teaching and classroom dynamics. In 2001 she won an Outstanding Teaching Award from Toronto.

The Star

continued from page 3

Big Dipper in the sky. And here Harriet Tubman was following the North Star to freedom, and it was life and death to *her*. I don't know if you know, she had narcolepsy as the result of an injury. So in the poem I say she "found it more than possible to sleep." At the same time there's "the pistol shoved deep into your pocket/along this route." That kind of determination. There were only two choices for her: Either you were going to be free, or you were going to die. I use a refrain by Rilke; it's from the first of the Duino Elegies: "Yes, the springtime needed you. Many a star was waiting for your eyes only."

P. Rilke is presumably speaking of the human contribution to our idea of nature "out there," such that spring "needs" us to give it existence as much as we need the spring. I love how you re-contextualize Rilke's line in relation to an escaped slave who gives the star its meaning of freedom. I assume that for you, the poet, there's still the north and the star and blackness and Harriet Tubman—presumably fixed points with variable meanings? It's in the last stanza that you mention the prison specifically.

L. Yes. It goes:

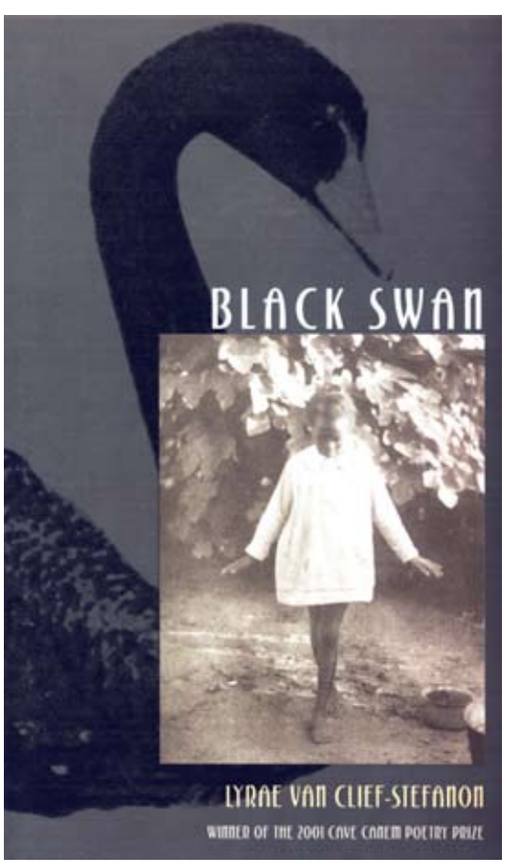
> At the prison at Auburn I cross the yard.
> Inmates whet tongues against
>
> my body, cement sculpted, poised for hate,
> pitch compliments
>
> like coins—*(wade)*—their silver
> slickening—*(in the water)*—
>
> uncollected change. A guard asks *Think they're beautiful? Just wait til they're out here stabbing each other.* Oh, Harriet, the stars
>
> throw down shanks, teach the sonnet's
> a cell, now try to escape.

For slaves, wading through water was a safety measure. In the stanza, in the tune that runs through my head, there's the idea of eliminating any trace of yourself so dogs would lose your scent. *Black Swan* talked about invisibility, and when you cross the yard at Auburn, you're very, very visible. But also invisible in some of the ways I talk about in *Black Swan.* The men are looking at you but as a sexual object. I don't know why this made me think of being a fountain in the middle of the prison—you know how you pitch coins in a fountain to make wishes.

P. I remember the yard well, and Tubman's little white house along the road. And always the irony that as you drive past Tubman's house, for whom the North meant freedom for blacks, you arrive at a place in the North where blacks are in prison.

L. Part of writing this poem comes from the fact that my house in Ithaca is on a corner downtown, just across from the projects. Looking down from my study window are the projects, and looking up, is the university. So that high/low distinction is played out visually for me every day, as I write. I'm so against high/low distinctions, I'd like to dismantle them as much as possible.

P. If poetry can help do that, then maybe poetry makes things happen after all.



Helen

"The most fascinating thing about Helen was her story. It was far better than she was."

Robert E. Bell, Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary

This is what I know about me:
on sunny days I fall in love
with my own shadow,
her bouncy gait, the way
she stretches off from me
at that sexy forty-five-degree angle.
She exposes the way that someone real
can disappear in broad day-
light. Ecliptic, she moves,
all form, no features,
seductive paraphrase,
isogloss of woman
projected against concrete.
Some days I search the mirror
hungry for her flatness,
her unfilled edges.
I turn on all the lights,
position the medicine
cabinets to surround yourself
in fifteen-layered reflection.
Sometimes I spot her:
the ninth me on the left;
the head that turned too slow,
the periphery out of sync
with those other pleading-
eyed clones. She scrutinizes
me until I push her into
the chimera of myself
with the magnetized doors,
look away from myself in
her exasperated stare—
"Girl, you're looking
right through me"—
The words behind her
wide black eyes.

THE END OF PRAISE

In the consuming dark
we cannot tell ourselves from
ghosts—we are skinless voices.

In concert we sound the richest
black vein through
each other. A disconcerting

chord, a thick fat rising
Hendrix haunted his guitar for—
the end of praise. The wheeze

of wind through silk distortion's
a screaming eagle's memory
of. Midnight flares

from the dark's moored barges—
we locate ourselves hurting
for longitude we sink

the knife in powder
of sympathy and listen
to the dogs as they howl.

Letter from the Chair

It has been an honor to serve once again as chair of the English Department, but I am delighted to report that Molly Hite has agreed to serve a regular three-year term, beginning in August 2007. Molly, a specialist in twentieth-century British and American literature, has taught at Cornell since 1982 and has won the Russell Distinguished Teaching Award, as well as NEH and ACLS fellowships. This past year she inaugurated a new course, The Great Cornell American Novel, which proved very popular and which we hope will become a staple of the curriculum.

Next year will be a year of transition for the English Department in other respects as well. As reported elsewhere in this newsletter, we lost two longtime colleagues this year: Joel Porte and Scott McMillin. In addition, the novelist Lamar Herrin has retired, and Hortense Spillers, the Whiton Professor of English and a distinguished scholar of African American literature, has decided to move to Vanderbilt University, where she can be near her ninety-year-old mother. All of these colleagues will be greatly missed.

We have a record number of five new assistant professors joining us this fall: J. Robert Lennon has published four novels, including *Mailman*, the black comedy of an Ithaca postman, and his latest work, *Happyland*, is the first novel to be serialized in *Harper's* in fifty years. Philip Lorenz, who works on drama, literary theory, and Renaissance literature, comes to us from NYU and the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Ernesto Quinonez is a novelist whose *Bodega Dreams* and *Chango's Fire*, remarkable stories of Spanish Harlem, have been highly praised. Carin Ruff, a medievalist who works on medieval Latin and the history of English, joins us from John Carroll University. Dagmawi Woubshet, a specialist in African and African American literature, is completing his PhD degree at Harvard. All in all, we will have ten assistant professors in the English Department next year, the largest number in the thirty years I have been here.

In this past year the English Department has been extremely fortunate in attracting the support of friends and donors for a wide variety of projects that could not be accomplished with the budget provided by the College of Arts and Sciences. I want to mention here donors who this year have been especially generous. A gift from Joseph Martino provides funding to enhance the experience of students in our English literature survey course, English 201-202 next year, especially by making available recordings of poems studied so that students can listen to assignments on their iPods. Philip Reilly, a great admirer of Vladimir Nabokov, provided funding to transform the space outside the English Department office into the Pale Fire Lounge, with comfortable seating and a display of Nabokov memorabilia. This is already a very popular space for relaxing between classes, informal meetings, and studying. David Picket has established an endowment to help provide summer support for second-year MFA students while they complete their manuscripts for the degree. Wendy Gellman has made a generous contribution to the chair's discretionary fund, which we use for special needs. Gifts from Dorothy Klopf and Cynthia Cohen support this newsletter and other important department activities. Jared Curtis and Anne Saddlemayer have contributed to the fund for the Cornell Yeats Edition. Richard Williamson made a gift in support of creative writing, and Frederick Parkin has continued his generous funding for the James McConkey Reading series.

M. H. Abrams, the Class of 1916 Professor Emeritus, and the most distinguished scholar in the history of the English Department, has generously endowed the prize for the best undergraduate honors thesis, to be known as the M. H. Abrams Prize. Presenting this prize for the first time at graduation this year, Mike Abrams told the assembled parents and graduates that it was winning such a prize in 1934, when he was an undergraduate at Harvard, that led him to enter the academic profession. (He had planned to be a lawyer, but during the Depression, lawyers were going hungry, and he decided he might as well starve doing something he enjoyed.) He reported that he had not planned to leave Harvard but in 1945 came to Cornell for a visit when offered a job, and fell in love with the place. When he phoned his wife to say, "Ruthie, we're moving to Ithaca," she replied, "Where's Ithaca?" but she too came to love the place, and they have stayed for 61 years. Mike is 94 but still an active scholar, and last year he brought out a new edition of his *Glossary of Literary Terms*.

Mike will be even more substantially honored by the establishment of the M. H. Abrams Distinguished Visiting Professorship, a gift of Stephen Weiss, former chair of the Board of Trustees and a longtime friend.

Finally, anonymous donors are providing us with a very munificent gift for the Creative Writing Program, to support for five years a reading series that will bring famous and interesting writers to campus to interact with undergraduates and graduate students, and provide funding for visiting writers to spend a semester here teaching creative writing and working with students on a longer-term basis.

We are extremely grateful to all these friends and generous donors, who make possible activities that our regular budgets do not allow. With substantial new funding for the Creative Writing Program and with a host of energetic young faculty members, not to mention a new chair, the English Department is poised for a very successful year.

Jonathan Culler

Faculty NOTES

Members of the faculty continue to publish widely in all fields. **Jami Carlacio's** *The Fiction of Toni Morrison: Teaching and Writing on Race, Culture, and Identity* is under contract with the National Council of Teachers of English. **Eric Cheyfitz** edited *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States since 1945.* **Jonathan Culler's** *The Literary in Theory*, a collection of essays on literary theory, was published this year by Stanford University Press. He is also editor of the four-volume *Structuralism: Critical Concepts* (Routledge, 2006). **Liz DeLoughrey's** *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture,* co-edited with George Handley and Renée Gosson, appeared last year from the University Press of Virginia. Her book *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* is forthcoming from the University of Hawai'i Press. **Andy Galloway** is the author of the first volume of *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman, Volume One: C Prologue-Passus 4; B Prologue-Passus 4; A Prologue-Passus 4* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). His book *Medieval Literature and Culture* is forthcoming from Continuum Press (London). He also chairs the Editorial Board of *The Yearbook of Langland Studies.* **Carol Kaske** has edited and introduced a new edition of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene Book One,* published this year by Hackett Publishing.

Epoch magazine, under the general editorship of **Michael Koch,** has received four O. Henry Awards for fiction published in Volume 53. The

continued on next page

Joel Porte 1933-2006

Norman Podhoretz remarked that "one of the longest journeys in the world is the one from Brooklyn to Manhattan," though one might imagine the journey from Brooklyn to Cambridge to be even longer. According to Joel Porte's retirement notice in this newsletter two years ago, he "seemed to intuit that his skill and interest in the nuances of language would be his ticket out of Brooklyn." After graduating from City College in 1957, where he won a prize in Greek and graduated Phi Beta Kappa, he spent thirty years at Harvard, completing his PhD degree there in 1962 before joining its professorial faculty. Most atypically for that institution, he was promoted to a full professorship when he was only thirty-six, and in 1982 was named the Bernbaum Professor of Literature. During those years, he established himself as one of the country's leading scholars of nineteenth-century American literature. A prolific essayist and lecturer, Porte also wrote on topics ranging from the Puritans to the philosophy of George Santayana to the poetry of Wallace Stevens. In all, he wrote or edited twelve books, including *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict*; *The Romance in America: Studies in Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville and James*; and *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time*. Earlier this year, he received the national Emerson Society's Distinguished Achievement Award, its highest honor.

His teaching at Cornell included courses on the American Renaissance, the Harlem Renaissance, Jewish American writing, and a seminar at the Society for the Humanities on cereal boxes, which explored the connections between food and religion, sexuality, politics, health, advertising, and aesthetics. A slide show based on the readings in the course became part of a lecture he delivered around the country.

In 1994 Joel retired from Cornell as the Ernest I. White Professor of American Studies and Humane Letters Emeritus. He became ill soon after, but in the midst of a difficult struggle, he continued to observe and enjoy. This spring he was able to manage, with his wife, Helene, a final trip to Rome. He died on June 1.

The following tribute, paid to him by Laura Brown on the occasion of his retirement, serves as an eloquent reminder of what Joel Porte meant to the intellectual life of Cornell:

"We felt extremely fortunate when we were able to persuade Joel to come to Cornell from Harvard in 1987. But there was an additional reason, beyond the mere question of eminence, that made this a crucial appointment for us. This department has prided itself on its willingness to change, but it also has resisted the temptation to trash its own heritage. As a result, though our department has often been seen as a 'happening' place, it has almost entirely avoided the hostilities that plagued many literature programs in the eighties and nineties. This is much more than a question of tone or collegiality, however. For we all know that today's young Turks are tomorrow's gray eminences. A large department that bets the farm on a single approach or subject is unlikely to be in the business of agriculture for long.

"And this is the second reason why Joel's arrival at Cornell made so much of a difference. In 1987, we were relatively thin at the senior level in American literature. We needed an anchor person in the area. Joel provided that and more. For undergraduates, in addition to his normal course offerings, he chaired the highly successful Arts College program in American Studies from 1989 to 1998. And he served on the special committees of a large number of students, including many non-specialists who through wisdom or luck realized the importance of working with someone who would treat their work with a combination of capacious generosity and a skeptical eye. With one of these (now former) students, Saundra Morris, he went on to co-edit two volumes devoted to Emerson. Their *Emerson's Prose and Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition* (2001) was adopted by the French Ministry of Education as a required text for the Agrégation, a national competitive exam for aspiring college teachers. This sort of collaboration is the norm in the sciences, even after the student completes the degree. It is of course extremely rare in our field and testifies to the rare fusion of education and research in Joel's career.

"This only begins to hint at the kind of presence Joel has been here. For he has brought to each of his endeavors not just his intellect and learning, but also a congeniality, humor, decency, and grace that are not easily quantified. Such traits are especially important at a place like Cornell and in a program like ours. Partly because of our location, we need to function as a community of scholars in the full sense of 'community.' In the absence of New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, or Los Angeles, the culture we help create, preserve, and transform is a large component of what we have to offer to our students and to ourselves.

"And so, Joel, though for decades before coming to Cornell you did great work at a great university, we honor you today above all as a great Cornell professor. Thank you and congratulations."

A memorial service for Joel will be held at Cornell in September.

Faculty NOTES

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stories reappear in *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2006* (Anchor). **Alison Lurie's** most recent novel, *Truth and Consequences,* was published last year by Viking (New York) and Chatto and Windus (London). **Dan McCall** has completed a screenplay of his novel *Triphammer*, with Ed Zuckerman (Cornell '69) and Christian Gallagher (Cornell '92). **Ken McClane's** new book of essays is in press. **Satya Mohanty** has introduced and co-translated *Six Acres and a Third. The Classic Nineteenth-Century Novel About Colonial India*, by Fakir Mohan Senapati (University of California Press, 2005). He has also co-edited *Identity Politics Reconsidered* with Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael Hames-García, and Paula Moya (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2006). **Tim Murray's** *Digital Baroque: Temporal Folds and the Memory of Cinema* is forthcoming from the University of Minnesota Press. Volumes 23 and 24 of The Cornell Yeats (*The King's Threshold*, edited by Declan Kiely, and *Diarmuid and Grania*, edited by J. C. C. Mays) appeared this year under the general editorship of **Stephen Parrish. Shirley Samuels** is editor of Volume 2 of the *Thomson Anthology of American Literature* (1800–1865), forthcoming in 2007. **Dan Schwarz's** *Reading the Modern British and Irish Novel: 1890–1930* appeared last year from Blackwell, in hard cover and paper. He is also general editor of that seven-volume series. **Helena Viramontes's** new novel *Their Dogs Came With Them* is forthcoming from Atrias/Simon & Schuster in 2007.

This year **Andy Galloway** was a winner of the Robert A. and Donna B. Paul Award for Excellence in Advising, conferred by the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell. Two members of the English Department received honorary degrees from other institutions. In May **Robert Morgan** received an honorary doctorate of letters from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and in June **Alison Lurie** received an honorary doctorate from Oxford.

Laura Donaldson is chair and co-founder of The Bible in Racial, Ethnic and Indigenous Communities Group of the American Academy of Religion. **Tim Murray** is curator of the Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. **Harry Shaw** is senior associate dean, College of Arts and Sciences. **Jonathan Culler** continues as a member of the Board of Directors, American Council of Learned Societies, and of the National Advisory Council of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. In May he was elected to the American Philosophical Society.

Faculty Retiring

Lydia Fakundiny: A Collaborative Life

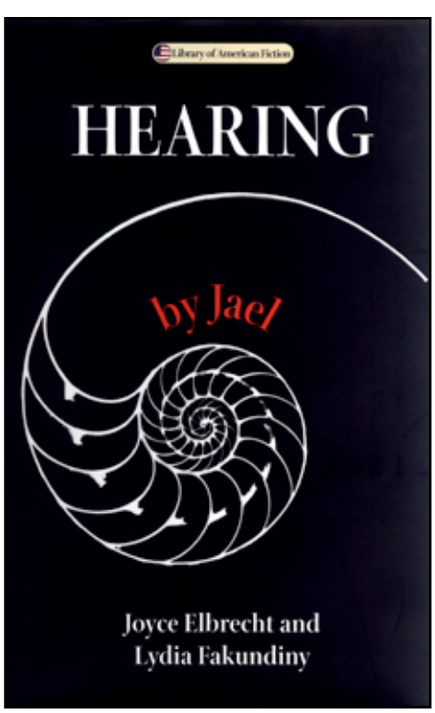
*For twenty-five years Lydia Fakundiny, senior lecturer in English, was a mainstay in the teaching of writing at Cornell. Her student evaluations—long a legend in the English Department—attested to a teacher who was both rigorous and inspiring. She won the College of Arts and Sciences' Clark Award for Distinguished Teaching as well as the Paul Award for Excellence in Advising, and was cited by several Merrill Presidential Scholars as their "most influential professor at Cornell." She also trained a generation of TAs through her exacting and sympathetic leadership. In her early incarnation as a medievalist, she wrote "The Art of Old English Verse Composition" (*RES*, May & Aug. 1970); as an innovative teacher of creative nonfiction, she edited* The Art of the Essay *(1991). This year, Lydia passed two milestones: she retired from the English Department, and, with Joyce Elbrecht, she published* Hearing, *the second of their two novels written under the collaborative persona "Jael B. Juba." (Joyce is a retired Ithaca College professor of philosophy.)*

In Paul Sawyer's recent conversation with Lydia about her work as a teacher and a writer, Joyce, not surprisingly, entered in as collaborator. The talk flowed from questions about collaborative writing—two people creating a single text—to issues of teaching.

Paul: What happens in joint authorship to markers of an individual's style, each writer's uniqueness, or what so often gets called "voice"?

Joyce: Struggles over who owns what voice have never been a problem in our collaboration. Isn't voice the grunts and sighs, the growls and laughter of mental movement, the stops and starts and turns made by a writer in intimacy with her audience? Voice comes with the audience's territory.

Lydia: That way of talking, Paul, which assumes the priority of voice in writing, has become entrenched and naturalized to the point where much of what we think of as "creative"—and self-creative—gets closed off in the writing process. In English 388 (The Art of the Essay), I "queered" the dubious concept of "finding one's own voice" by, among other things, using imitation exercises. The point was to open up new rhetorical spaces, to discover how one comes to exist in a discourse, the person one might become.



Joyce: As a teacher I never had a problem with voice—you have an audience in a class. And in writing our novels, we've never needed to ask who the audience is; for me, the moot answer is "Lydia."

Lydia: Our collaboration works to the extent that each of us is so attuned to the other's writing, she gets hold of where it's headed and how to take it there—and a bit farther. We become each other's ideal reader, and that's how the writing builds.

Paul: Writing as reading, in other words.

Lydia: Yes. What our collaboration taught me was the centrality of reading. Attunement to text means engaging with its desire, where it "wants" to go. What might this become? Who's trying to speak here? What form does it want to take?

Paul: And this approach translated into your teaching? How?

Lydia: For some time, I wasn't aware how deeply my pedagogy was inspired and shaped by collaboration, even when I recognized that teaching students how to read one another's writing had to come first. They thought that critiquing a classmate's work meant saying things like "This doesn't work for me" or "I'd like it better if you did X"—comments that say a lot about what the reader feels and prefers but are useless to the author (and possibly a dangerous distraction from her own ends as a writer). The critic has to start by asking things like: What essay is this writer trying to make?—meaning, for a reader: What does this text, this gathering of words, want to be? And only afterwards: Where and how does it let me down? Sympathetic engagement has to come first if your critique's to have any practical value.

Paul: So any writing course is, therefore, at the same time a course in close reading.

Lydia: A good reader submits to the will of the text, however incompletely realized. I like Helen Vendler's definition of close reading: "reading from the point of view of the writer, from within the text."

Paul: Described in that way, your classes begin to sound like your own collaboration as a novelist.

Lydia: Students tend to write under a kind of ceiling, as if they're supposed to write some certain way to remain true to themselves, not strive for how "real" writers write—that wouldn't be authentic somehow. The imitation exercises in 388 pushed them to the discovery that there are no ceiling and no walls, that it's possible for them to express all manner of things they couldn't have said in their "own" voices. They encounter their own complexity as subjects.

Paul: The terms seem to have shifted here from "I" and "writer" to "writing" and "text."

According to Stuart Davis: "This comedy of lost causes fortuitously recovered, peoples joined, and houses fallen and passionately recovered poses a challenge to the South's familiar story of patriarchy lamed in its descendants by blood guilt and racial conflict. ***Hearing*** is a book about terror and ruin that is, curiously, never far from festival at any point."

See more at ***www.wisc.edu/wisconsinpress/Presskits/ElbrechtFakundiny_Hearing.html.***

Lydia: Yes. Writing moves you into the ambit of language as a whole, into history, the experiential constructs of a culture. But you have to first feel permission to be released into that vastness, some kind of imperative to do it, to take its bearings; you can't be stuck on your habitual ways of saying things, on your "own personal voice."

Paul: But you don't simply leave the personal behind, do you?

Lydia: The "personal" in writing becomes itself a multidimensional process of change. One of the things writing is all about is constructing a being for yourself out of the symbolic material of language, a place to inhabit in the fluid medium of prose.

Joyce: The name Lydia and I've given to the "personal" place we share in our collaboration is "Jael B. Juba."

Lydia: And this thing—this process, rather—we call "I" is always in the making. Language is an infinitely rich and precise cultural medium for self-fashioning, the modeling we do for others.

Joyce: Free to go from pen to pen, so to speak.

Lydia: Or to rest silently.

Paul: It seems that, in the broadest sense of the term as we've been using it, life, too, is collaboration.

Joyce: I get the last word! I get the last word!

Paul: You do?

Joyce: I speak in the imperative mood: Read our novels.

Lydia: And then, dear readers, write your imitations.

Scott McMillin 1934-2006

Scott McMillin, a member of the Cornell English Department since 1964, died suddenly in March. A graduate of Princeton with a PhD degree from Stanford, he became an authority on the texts and early performances of Shakespeare's plays, with a special interest in American musical theater. His book The Queen's Men and Their Plays *(1998), written with Sally-Beth MacLean, won the Sohmer-Hall Prize for best work in early theater history. At his death he left a book on the texts of the First Folio and* The Musical as Drama *(just published by Princeton University Press). In 1972 he won the Clark Award for Distinguished Teaching. A passionate believer in social justice, he was for many years a director of the Harlem Literacy Project and a faculty fellow in Ujamaa, a residential program house at Cornell. In the words of Stuart Davis, "There was no more rigorous scholar or kinder or more committed man" (*Cornell Daily Sun*, March 31, 2006). The following tribute was presented by Reeve Parker at Scott's memorial service at Sage Chapel in May.*

Scott had a way of working in his office, in the busiest part of the second floor of Goldwin Smith across the hall from the English Department administrative offices. His door was usually somewhat ajar. In recent years I came to feel that door said come on in—and often I did, usually to find him at work at his desk but welcoming a brief visit. The paradox was that he got so much done in that office, when he was at the peak of his career. When I came back yesterday, I found the door shut.

There's such a lot to like in Scott's prose. He could make music with the dry as dust. Confronted with "the thousands of tiny differences in punctuation" between the First Quarto and the Folio edition of *Othello*, he begins by conceding that "many of the tiny variations do not matter in themselves," but then goes on to say, "but in their accumulation they demand an explanation for their number and smallness, a theory of their punctiliousness." Like a master chef, he makes appetizers out of trifles. Here's a sentence later on from his book on the First Quarto: "Finding, on the contrary, the Quarto 1 punctuation to be full of interest and more systematic than is assumed, I propose to advance upon the textual problem by way of the comma, the semi-colon, the colon and—best of all—the period." It's that phrase—"best of all"—set off by dashes that makes way for "the period." And the word "period" is followed by the punctuation period.

I knew Scott in a number of places and contexts. They can all be pretty much summed up in one word: Theater. Sometimes the theater was large, like the National in London or [Bailey Hall] at Cornell—and sometimes it was tiny, like the downtown Kitchen Theater, or in the sixties and seventies the basement theater in Lincoln Hall, or Risley, or—most memorably to me—the tiny Bush Theatre upstairs at Shepherd's Bush London where in January 1993 we walked to see an actress named Kelly Hunter play a psychiatric patient with 95% of the lines, who sang and danced in front of her analyst—in a play with a Rolling Stones title: *Not Fade Away.* (A love song I always thought of as a rejoinder to General MacArthur, that World War Two hero, who presided over returning Japan to sustained civility and who said "Old Soldiers never die, they just fade away.") On the long walk back afterwards, Scott encouraged me in my hunch to invite [Kelly Hunter] to play the lead, Beatrice Cenci, in a production of Percy Shelley's tragedy *The Cenci* at Queens College in Cambridge later that spring. You had to walk with Scott.

Going to the theater with Scott and his wife, Sally, was something I really looked forward to. There was a routine—"Let's meet for a quick supper" near the theater then walk to the show—and they always knew where to eat. I soon learned that meeting them on a corner in Soho near Piccadilly Circus on a Saturday evening when the place was full of Londoners and tourists was dead easy because Scott was so tall he stood out and walked along with such relaxed readiness.

And some of the theaters we went to were illegitimate—or so some people in authority thought. And impromptu: Like Barton Hall in the Spring of '69 when Scott and I found ourselves as it were on stage as members of an impromptu company —hardly the Queen's Men—called—get this—the Committee of Concerned Faculty, planning to encircle Willard Straight Hall or any building peaceably occupied by students to avert what might otherwise be bloodshed. (As bit players in that company we found out later that we were known to some of our betters as the "hotheads.") Another such scene was the faculty Shantytown on the hillside in front of the A. D. White House during the South African divestment protest in the eighties.

And most recently there was Redbud Woods. A vivid image lingers in my mind. Among those tall trees there was Scott standing with a handful of students, faculty, and townspeople, listening to the president explaining WHOSE WOODS THESE WERE. . . . The look on Scott's face—he had for years walked past those woods on his way to teach and write—WITH MILES TO GO BEFORE HE SLEPT—his face was an icon of sustainability.

And he played the piano. Music for him was drama. One of my last glimpses of Scott at the keyboard was at the memorial for Alton Heinz at the Mermins' house. Heinz was a legendary teacher to whom Scott brought his fascination with the drama of twentieth-century musicals. Most people there spoke, but Scott was one of the few who performed, crouched over the keyboard, playing tribute with his hands. Hands that loved books, packing or unpacking and shelving them at the Friends of the Library—or in his office or at home that last evening, book in hand, reading.

Four loving words end what I have to say about Scott: NOT FADE AWAY . . . PERIOD.

Faculty NOTES

Retiring: Lamar Herrin

What would anyone say, in an age of sophisticated irony in literature and seemingly permanent disillusionment in politics, to the story of a young American who falls in love with Spain and a beautiful woman on his first trip abroad—and then marries her? Add to this that the young man has chiseled good looks and insurable cheekbones and arrives fresh from a career in Hollywood. The only thing less likely is that this daydream would be followed by thirty years of a happy family life, a career in writing, and now an enchanting memoir of those early, permanent loves—for both the country and the wife—entitled *Romancing Spain* (Unbridled Books, 2006).

In other words, though Lamar Herrin casts himself as Quixote to his wife's Sancho in the memoir, his life since that memorable trip shows he has been a dreamer of possible dreams. The Hollywood career came to naught but the loss to film was a gain to Cornell and the world of letters. (Fortunately, a video treasury of Lamar's best acting bits, featuring heroic pilots and gunfighters, was shown at his retirement party this spring and survives in the possession of the English Department.) In his twenty-nine years here, the MFA program in writing became one of the finest in the nation, a development unthinkable without his tireless devotion—his dedicated work with young writers, his clear-sighted leadership as program administrator, and his unfailing generosity to his colleagues, both scholars and writers. His essay for last year's newsletter—with its vision of scholarship enhancing writers, and writers enlivening the whole experience of the university—typifies his profound sense of Cornell as a community.

In addition to stories in *The New Yorker, Paris Review,* and *Epoch*, Lamar has written five novels: *The Rio Loja Ringmaster, American Baroque, The Unwritten Chronicles of Robert E. Lee, The Lies Boys Tell*, and *The House of the Deaf.* In each book Lamar shows himself to be a sharp-sighted observer of human tragedy as well as human joy. The last novel, a companion-piece of sorts to *Romancing Spain*, balances the real-life idyll with a grimmer, fictional journey to the same country. (The title refers to Goya, whose great painting depicting two larger-than-life-sized peasants cudgeling each other, desperately and eternally, haunts the story of a father's search for the truth about a daughter blown apart in Madrid by terrorists.)

The dedication of *Romancing Spain*, in which the author thanks his wife, Amparo, for "giving me this love story to write," and the dedication of *The House of the Deaf* to his children ("To Rafael and Delia, who have exceeded all my expectations") are as typical of Lamar as anything he has written. They remind us that good dreams can change the world, empower others, and return to bless the dreamer. Though he will be long missed, his numberless friends, colleagues, and students wish for him and Amparo a retirement that, like so much else in his career, will exceed all expectations.

—Paul Sawyer

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