

# BU ENGLISH ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

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## Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends,

The 2016-17 academic year was an eventful one for the BU English Department. We said goodbye to a cohort of graduating majors who enter a world sorely in need of the critical thinking, historical perspective, communication skills, and fundamental humanity that the study of literature fosters. We also saw the retirement of James Winn—William Fairfield Warren Distinguished Professor, Chair of the English department from 1998-2007, and tireless champion of the humanities at BU and beyond.



*Maurice Lee*

As we wish our departing students and colleagues the best, we are fortunate for new arrivals. In addition to majors joining the department, we welcome two recently appointed professors—Adriana Craciun and Takeo Rivera, whose exciting work you can learn more about below. BU's new general education requirements also afford opportunities for the English department to bring literature to a broader range of students across the university. As one generation leaves the department, we look forward to the next and hope to maintain connections with all.

In that spirit, we hope that you'll stay in touch through our website ([bu.edu/English](http://bu.edu/English)) and Facebook page ([facebook.com/bostonuniversityenglish/](https://facebook.com/bostonuniversityenglish/)).

Best wishes,

Maurice Lee

Chair and Professor of English

To donate to the B.U. English Department, go to:  
<http://www.bu.edu/english/alumni/make-a-gift/>

## Two Professors Join the English Department

### ADRIANA CRACIUN



Describing the work of incoming Metcalf Professor Adriana Craciun is no simple thing. A British romanticist, she began her career studying women poets, including their cosmopolitan networks in France. Her interests then turned to the relationship of literature and the history of science, where she has published prize-winning work on oceans and the Arctic. Her recent book, *Writing Arctic Disaster: Authorship and Exploration* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), focuses on texts generated by arctic voyages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Craciun is currently exploring how Enlightenment thinkers imagined preserving life over long stretches of time, which explains why the English department's job offer to her was first extended via Skype to a dormitory in the Arctic where Craciun had just returned by snowmobile from the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. Craciun

comes to BU from UC-Riverside, where she held a University of California Presidential Chair. She continues BU's strong tradition in British Romanticism and will take over the editorship of *Studies in Romanticism*, the field's flagship journal long housed in the English department.

### TAKEO RIVERA

A recent Ph.D. recipient from the University of California-Berkeley, Takeo Rivera specializes in contemporary American drama and performance with particular interests in multimedia approaches to race, gender, and sexuality. His dissertation, *Minority Models: Masochism, Masculinity, and the Machine in Asian American Cultural Politics*, focuses on representations of Asian Americans in performance, drama, film, and video games. In addition to having a background in acting and slam poetry, Rivera is a playwright whose work has been produced in New York City, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area. He is excited to contribute to the rich performance resources in the Boston Area, including BU's own Playwrights' Theatre.



## Writing for the Mayor

*Dr. Eoin Cannon, the chief speech writer for Mayor Marty Walsh, received his doctorate in English at BU in 2009 with a dissertation on the literature of addiction. Here Dr. Cannon talks about his work at the City Hall and the transition from academia to political communications.*

### **What prompted your decision to leave academia and join Mayor Walsh's administration?**

When the mayoral race began in 2013, I was approaching a transition in my academic career. I had a book coming out, but I had only about a year left in a lecturer position at Harvard. I wanted to stay in Boston, and I was looking at my options in teaching and administration, but I found my attention drawn to politics.



*Eoin Cannon*

Mayor Walsh's campaign brought together some of the themes I had explored in my work, like labor, liberalism, and mental health. It was intriguing to see these themes take center stage in an election that was also about the next chapter in the history of Boston, a city I've lived in and studied most of my life. At the same time, the Mayor's record of bridging traditional labor interests with social justice advocacy wasn't well known citywide. So I took the opportunity to help. It seemed like a great adventure.

***Does your academic training have any impact on your work in political communications?***

It does. My training taught me that words and ideas have histories, that things sound different from different social positions, that arguments need to anticipate counter-evidence. It taught me to approach

both policy claims and famous quotations with skepticism. These habits of mind become second nature in graduate school, but they are not common in professional communications. In government especially, they can help you raise the standard and avoid embarrassments.

For example, on Martin Luther King Jr. Day events, I try to avoid blunting King's radicalism or ignoring his call for economic justice and its ongoing relevance. Or at tech industry events, I might suggest ways of celebrating entrepreneurs without hailing them as society's saviors.

***You were an academic for more than a decade. What's the biggest difference between working in academia and in the public sector?***

I've found government offices, at least at Boston's City Hall, more egalitarian than I was used to in universities. There's a formal respect for position, but under the pressures of daily collaboration, distinctions often fade into the background. People are more frank, more affectionate. I've heard that in government when things go bad, they can go very very bad, but the Walsh Administration has been a happy family.

The difference in writing style is considerable, but the concerns are familiar. As an academic writer, like many junior scholars, I had been on a journey from very dense dissertation prose to more reader-friendly and decisive writing. Speechwriting took me a few steps further in that direction, and added the challenges of writing for the spoken word in someone else's voice. The mayor's speaking voice is direct, concrete, and human. Writing for him has made me a better writer.

***Your fondest memories of BU?***

Learning from wonderful professors, like my advisor Susan Mizruchi, and hanging out in the grad student offices on the first floor of 236 Bay State Road. A department softball team that we took way too seriously but had a lot of fun with. I got to know some really great people in my MA and PhD cohorts. Because of the age you enter grad school and how long it takes to get through, you get to see people make huge transitions in their personal lives as well as their careers. It's gratifying to see people take very different paths but come out okay.

## Making the Business Case for Poetry

BY STEVEN BIONDOLILLO (BU English Major, '77)

According to management consultant and best-selling author Deborah C. Stephens, who studies the human side of business, including the pastimes of executives, I am one of a dozen CEOs she's interviewed over the years who both write and employ poetry as a regular part of staff management and customer relations.

For my part, that means using poetry in meetings, seminars and workshops to foster personal growth, leadership development, and team-building. My job is to set up and present the poems. The team's job is to absorb, analyze and discuss them. Notably, the poems I use would probably not be your Aunt Tillie's favorites:

- **"480 B.C."** captures the story of the 300 Spartans who saved Western Democracy at the Battle of Thermopylae, and enables a team to dissect the role of leadership in life-and-death situations.
- **"For the Athletes Unsung"** tells the story of the last three individuals cut from the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team, and serves as a reminder that we all contribute to success in enterprises greater than ourselves.
- **"The Man in the Alley"** is a dramatic statement about the governing power of thought, as well as the importance of nurturing one's youthful dreams.

Other poems I've used successfully include ones ranging from the magic of city playgrounds and realities of elite athletics to heartbreaking current events.

You might be asking yourself what any of this has to do with business, staff management or customer relations. The answer that I would offer is... everything. If the essence of good management is good communication, and good communication is dependent on language, then workplaces should be full of our culture's most powerful language—language that communicates the most content in the most concise form—poetry.

In the title of an award-winning essay, Dana Gioia—a former advertising executive and chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts—famously asks, "Can Poetry Matter?" As Gioia knew when writing the essay, his rhetorical question had been even more famously answered decades earlier by William Carlos Williams, a medical doctor and poet from Patterson, N.J., who declared: "It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there."

April is National Poetry Month—a very good time to create a "place" for poetry, thereby deepening the dialogue with staff and customers. A recent national study conducted at the University of Arizona reports that individuals who spend more of their day having deep discussions and less of their day making small talk are happier. This study, it could be argued, makes the scientific case for poetry in the workplace.



*Steven Biondolillo*

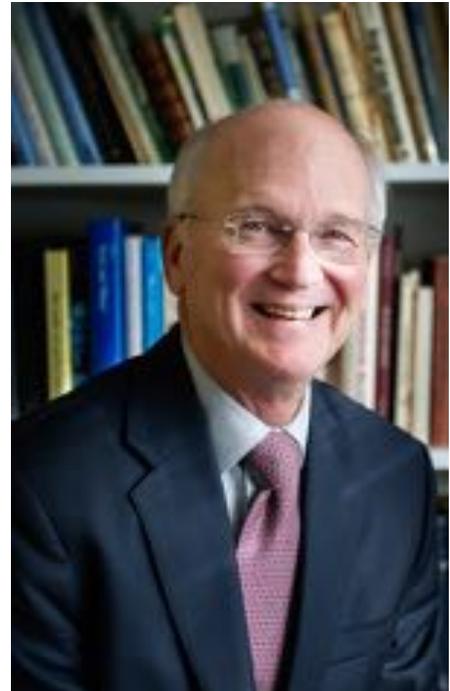
According to Google, the word “poetry” is searched in the United States over 5 million times per month. Reportedly, it is among the most-searched words online in the English language—a fact that expresses the natural intelligence of a public in search of deeper communication and closer connection in stressful times. Business leaders, then, should consider seizing the facts and answering the call. Poetry. Key it in. There’s an astonishing amount there to engage.

*Steven H. Biondolillo is the president of Biondolillo Associates Inc., and the author of a volume of poetry titled Macaroni and Cheese Manifesto.*

## James Winn: Reflections on Teaching, Scholarship, and the Future of the Humanities

One of the most striking qualities of Professor Winn’s career is the breadth of interests he has pursued as a scholar and teacher. Over the past forty years, he has written a book on the letters of Alexander Pope, a study of war poetry from Homer to Bruce Springsteen, and a polemic on the place of performance in humanistic study. His first biography, *John Dryden and His World* (1987), remains the definitive account of the poet’s life and art, and his recent book, *Queen Anne: Patroness of Arts* (2014), offers a comprehensive, interdisciplinary account of Anne’s reign and her support of the arts.

Yet all these projects share a common approach and sensibility. “In the humanities,” Winn says, “new methods and theories do not necessarily invalidate older methods and theories, and I have been stubbornly old-fashioned in much of my work, which combines close reading of texts with wide-ranging contextual research on the political, religious, philosophical, and cultural contexts in which those works arose. If I can make any claim to being innovative, I would point to my interdisciplinary work bringing together the intertwined histories of music and poetry.”



*James Winn*

Professor Winn will be retiring this summer after coming to BU nineteen years ago from the University of Michigan. When asked to reflect on his time in the English Department, he singles out the faculty’s passion for teaching as its most salient feature. “As a young and eager teacher at Yale, I encountered quite a lot of cynicism about teaching from older colleagues, which I found disheartening. At BU, I have been delighted to see that my colleagues strongly emphasize teaching in hiring, mentoring, and evaluating younger faculty, and that they are inclined to honor and value senior faculty who are conscientious and effective teachers.”

Of course, teaching today presents different challenges than it did when Winn began his career in the 1970s. “Today’s students have much shorter attention spans,” he admits. “They are better readers of visual materials, but weaker readers of texts. We have responded by offering fewer lecture courses and more seminars, which bring us closer to the needs of individual students, and most of us

now use more visual materials.” But if the speed of the new technology makes students reluctant to slow down and read closely, Winn also stresses that the internet has provided a wealth of new resources. “Thanks to databases of early texts, I can give students the opportunity to look closely at primary materials, something that used to be possible only in those few universities with substantial rare book collections.”

He expresses far greater concern for the fate of the humanities in today’s cultural and political climate. “Externally, the humanities have lost quite a lot of power and prestige. When I was an undergraduate, most of the presidents of top private universities were humanists; now almost all are scientists. Research support is scarce: the Federal government now spends \$269 on scientific research for every \$1 it spends on humanities research, and the NEH will probably not survive this president. Our enrollments are down, as everyone knows, and the attention paid to our work in the media has shrunk to almost nothing.”

Yet he also remains hopeful about the future of the humanities. “We certainly do not lack for bright and committed younger scholars: whenever we have a search, we have the luxury of choosing from a group of very strong candidates. Interdisciplinary humanities centers and institutes, two of which I have directed, have helped promote dialogue across disciplinary boundaries, and I count that as a positive development. As the current fixation on using college exclusively to train for a lucrative career begins to fade, I hope that students and even parents will come to recognize the need for the skills that humanities courses develop.”

One thing scholars can do, he suggests, is speak to a broader audience. “We write too much work that is of interest only to our fellow-scholars, and perhaps only to our fellow-scholars working in a particular sub-field or embracing a particular theoretical method.” Winn himself has begun to write for a general audience with his book *The Poetry of War* (2008). After retirement, he hopes to write another, entitled *Listening to Songs*.

## Four Questions for Alix Jansma (B.A. '17)



*Alix Jansma*

### **What drew you to the study of English literature in the first place?**

I transferred to BU as a sophomore from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, where I studied Acting. Theater was a passion of mine all throughout high school. UArts was a conservatory, though, and it was all acting all the time, no academics. As much as I enjoy thinking creatively and participating in the arts, I really missed exercising my other intellectual faculties. I chose English because I thought it would be a good mix of my left-brain-right-brain capabilities, as indeed it was.

### **Could you tell us about a professor who had a major impact on your studies here?**

Professor Amy Appleford has had a hugely positive impact on my education here. I took her Seminar in Literature, which focused on the notion of innocence. We read the poems of William Blake and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, but she made sure to sprinkle some medieval literature, too. We read *Sir Orfeo* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, and that’s when I started to gravitate towards medieval literature.

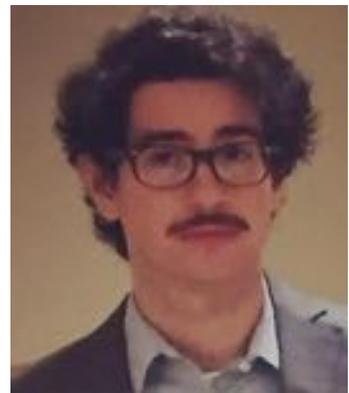
**Beyond your coursework, what were some of the highlights of your time at BU?**

One is my work as a writing tutor at the CAS Writing Center. I loved helping students improve their writing, which in turn improved mine a great deal. Another experience I enjoyed was performing with Willing Suspension, a Renaissance theater group run by the English graduate students. I felt immediately welcomed when I first auditioned to play Firk in *Shoemaker's Holiday* alongside a great group of humble, professional, intelligent actors and directors. We recently put on *The Witch of Edmonton*, where I played a demonic dog.

**What work would you like to pursue after graduation?**

I currently intern at Racepoint Global, an integrated marketing and PR agency. I am responsible for conducting any research the team needs in order to craft their proposals. For example, they wanted to know whether the housing market is affected by generational differences. Now I know more about the housing market than I ever thought I would!

## An Interview with Miguel Hernandez Mercado (B.A. '17)



*Miguel Hernandez Mercado*

**How did you become interested in English?**

I didn't know what I wanted to do when I came to college, but I've always really liked literature and I knew I would enjoy the classes. I wasn't trying to prepare for anything; I just wanted to take the classes for their own sake. Most books I've devoted proper time to reveal some new perspective about life—imagine gathering those for four years. Also, I knew that a big part of my coursework would be reading novels, which is just fun to do.

**What are some of your favorite authors and books, and why?**

Just for the sake of variety, I'll mention my love for Latin American fiction. For example, Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges. They're just such very creative people. Re-reading *100 Years of Solitude* is like a lesson I take every now and then about how many different things a novel can contain.

**Which course had the greatest impact on you?**

Looking back, I think Literature of the American South with Professor John Matthews was one of the English classes I remember with most fondness. Part of it, I think, was that some of the issues that had to come up when discussing the American South seemed pressing at the time. I also loved that we covered modern novels (*The Known World* by Edward P. Jones is so good). Many of my classmates seemed very engaged, too. It was my first time reading Faulkner—just great.

**What were some of the highlights of your time at BU beyond the coursework?**

I wrote for the school's newspaper; I'd consider that a highlight. But, looking back, the things that stand out the most beyond my coursework from my time at BU don't tend to be structured activities in that sense. I'm thinking of the people I met, the hobbies I picked up, things like that.

**How do you feel studying literature has prepared you for your future endeavors?**

The writing skills I've developed through the English major I feel will prove helpful. I also felt intellectually engaged with the world these years studying literature—that has to carry over.

## Catching Up With BU's English Seniors



### Madeleine Roepe

*What will you be doing next year?*

I'll be pursuing my PhD in English at the University of California, Santa Barbara in the fall! There is just so much more to learn, and so many exciting projects to dip my hands into. Any piece of literature is endlessly interpretable. How one understands the words offered on a page reveals just as much about the author as it does about the reader. I think that through literature, just as through history or biology or any other field of study, we get to the core of what it means to be creatures that feel. I was struck by this, even as a child: through reading, we open ourselves up and

become receptacles for any kind of feeling felt in the entire history of humankind, whether we've ever known it before or not.

### Lydia Erickson

*What are your plans after graduation?*

I was selected to teach English in Japan next year through INTERAC, a program that sends Americans to teach English in towns all over the country. This summer I will be working as a tutor with Lydian Academy. After next year, I might do a year as an AmeriCorps volunteer, and then go to graduate school for public interest law or school psychology. I also have plans as a writer: I would like to start publishing my poems and stories more widely, attend targeted workshops, and eventually publish a few novels. Literature teaches us how to communicate and empathize, social skills that are necessary for success in matters both personal and professional.



### Lauren Shapiro

*What were your favorite English classes at BU?*



As a freshman, the unconventional Professor Aaron Fogel got me excited about studying English literature for the next years. He taught my Major Authors class, jumping from conspiracy theories and structuralism to humor in Homer. Then there was Professor Amy Appleford's class, "Medieval Bodies," which focused on sex and sexuality in medieval texts. It was the first time I had ever read Foucault and Butler. She was a great teacher, making medieval literature *interesting* and *relevant*. Then there was Professor Jonathan Foltz's class on Virginia Woolf. It was the first

small, heavy discussion class I took in the English department. Professor Foltz was a great teacher and mediator. Then there was Professor John Paul Riquelme's literary criticism class in my junior year. He kept the mood of the class light even as we untangled some heavy conceptual material, from structuralism to the cyborg manifesto. He really encouraged thinking outside the box.