

BU ENGLISH ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

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Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends,

Greetings once again from the English Department at BU. This year’s newsletter will focus on people in the department. We said goodbye to four distinguished colleagues who retired in spring 2018—Julia Brown, Bonnie Costello, Bob Levine, and Bill Loizeaux. You can read more about each of them below. We also celebrated the appointment of four new



endowed professorships in the department: Erin Murphy was named the National Endowment for the Humanities Distinguished Teaching Professor; Susan Mizruchi was named the William Arrowsmith Professor of the Humanities; Louis Chude-Sokei was installed as the new Wein Chair in African-American Studies; and Adriana Craciun was installed as the Emma MacLaughlen Metcalf Chair. Two new books by English faculty appeared in the fall of 2017, and Maurice Lee won a one-year fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute, an award that relieved him from his duties as department Chair for the year. With BU’s new general education requirements (the “BU Hub”) kicking into gear in fall 2018, the department began adapting its curriculum and anticipating the arrival of more students from across BU. With all these changes, we are looking forward to what the next several years will bring, and we hope that you’ll follow our news both through our website (bu.edu/English) and through our Facebook page (facebook.com/bostonuniversityenglish/).

Best wishes,
Rob Chodat
Acting Chair

Louis Chude-Sokei Joins English

This year the English Department welcomed Louis Chude-Sokei as George and Joyce Wein Chair in African American Studies. After completing his doctorate at UCLA, Chude-Sokei held professorships at UC-Santa Cruz and the University of Washington. He is currently serving as Director of BU's African American Studies Program, where he hopes to "reimagine how race matters and functions" and explore "how differences coexist, how diversity truly works, and how knowledge rooted in difference can produce solutions."

Chude-Sokei specializes in the African Diaspora, including literature from Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States. His first book, *The Last Darcy: Bert Williams, Black on Black Minstrelsy and the African Diaspora* (2006), traces the influence of blackface performance and immigration on the Harlem Renaissance. His recent book, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (2016), studies historical and current connections between black experience, music, and technology. Editor-in-Chief of the influential journal, *The Black Scholar*, Chude-Sokei is currently focusing on two topics—what he calls "the relationship between American racial formations and the ongoing problematics of immigration," and "the continuing impact of race on technology in robotics and Artificial Intelligence."

Chude-Sokei is excited about his new home. He describes his colleagues as "stellar and cool," and appreciates the energy of the English department and BU in general. "As I keep telling people," he says, "something good is going on here, and I'm happy to be a part of it." Moving to Boston, however, has brought at least one challenge. "I'm still worried about the food scene here," he says. "So far the Tapas is good but I've yet to find world class sushi."



Carina Imbornone on Studying English at BU

Carina Imbornone is a rising junior double majoring in English and Economics at BU. Born and raised in Methuen, Massachusetts, she attributes her love of literature to her mother and local library.

What are you doing this summer?

I have a few different jobs and internships that I'm juggling. I'm a writing intern at *BU Today*, a social media intern at the literary agency Aevitas Literary/Marina Keegan, and an Access and Inclusion Assistant at GrubStreet, the creative writing center. I also read for the *New England Review* and write my own fiction and non-fiction.



What do you like about being an English major?

Something I find really scary and exciting about English is that there is no way to "read it all"—there are just too many books! This makes research immersive. I also think the act of writing, especially writing fiction, is like an exercise in playing god. To be able to credibly put forth a storyline is pretty incredible, given the depth of world building and the variables involved.

Retirements

The English department lost no less than four beloved colleagues to retirement in 2017-18. The following brief tributes cannot convey the full range of personal and intellectual contributions that they gave us over the years. Generations of students and colleagues benefited from their knowledge, passion, dedication, and wisdom, and they have done much to make our department as successful as it is.

Julia Prewitt Brown came to BU as an Assistant Professor in 1974 after finishing her PhD at Columbia. In 1979, she published her first book, *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* (1979). In 1981, she left BU for what would be a total of nine years, during which time she taught as a lecturer at Harvard and MIT, and then as an Assistant and Associate Professor at Providence College. She returned to BU as an Associate Professor of English in 1990 and was promoted to Full Professor in 1998. After returning to BU, she published two monographs on nineteenth-century British culture: *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (1997) and *The Bourgeois Interior: How the Middle Class Imagines Itself in Literature and Film* (2008). Professor Brown will continue to pursue her scholarly interests in cinema while she works on a book about John Schlesinger, the director of *Midnight Cowboy*, *Marathon Man*, and other films. Professor Brown has won a variety of fellowships and awards, but if you ask colleagues and students in the English department what sets her apart, they will talk not only about her wide learning, but also about her willingness to listen, her easy laugh, and her generosity of spirit. Students and colleagues in the English department will miss this deeply humane and compassionate colleague and friend.

What drew you to BU?

My scholarship was the biggest factor in attending BU, but I also genuinely loved the location and DIY energy here when I enrolled. I love the people I've met at BU and am really happy I chose to go here.

What has been your biggest challenge at BU?

Realizing I can't do everything I want to do and live every life that I can happily imagine, no matter how much I might want to; and that I can make mistakes, little or big, and that's okay.

What about your biggest joy?

Meeting the people that I have met—in my major, my dorm, at my job—and finding a little slice of community that feels like something I helped to create rather than something I just joined out of a lack of better options. I am so grateful I've been able to reach out to artists that I hope to be like one day and actually hear back from them—people like the video artist Ryan Trecartin and the mother of Marina Keegan, Tracy Schoolman. I feel like I'm actually moving toward the creative, connected life that I once dreamt of having.

Any anecdotes from BU classes?

I had Robert Levine for two classes at BU. There are too many eccentric moments from his classes to count—from getting his home number before final papers were due so we could call him with questions and complaints—but only before 7pm—to talking about *Sesame Street* and *Count Dracula*. Nothing about his classes was linear; they looped around on themselves.

What's on your "things to read" list?

Pachinko, *A Little Life*, *Oreo*, *Where'd You Go Bernadette*, *The Art of Fiction*, *The Girls*, *Fact of a Body*, *Bluets*, *American Psycho*. I'm currently reading Molly McCloskey's book, *Straying*.

So what's next for you?

I want to work on fiction and focus on taking classes in writing and producing more work. I also want to intern at a magazine in New York before I graduate. Next semester, I'll be finishing my Economics degree abroad at Sciences Po in Paris, France.



Ellen Shenette: From English to Biz School to the Environment

Ellen Shenette (formerly Shea) graduated from the BU English Department in 2006. She attended business school at Simmons College and is now Senior Analyst at the Environmental Defense Fund. We asked Ellen to reflect on her experiences and career path.

Like many young people, I didn't begin college knowing what I would study. I chose BU for the excitement of the city of Boston and for the breadth and depth of BU coursework. Deciding to study English was a harder choice. Although I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, I knew I loved reading and felt that studying literature would give me a well-rounded humanities education. The experience overall was excellent: I loved many of my English courses, especially Shakespeare courses with Professors Carroll and Siemon. I also loved Contemporary American Literature, which offered me my first exposure to authors like Roth, Oates, and O'Connor. Despite enjoying my classes, though, I never had a great answer to the question: *What are you going to do with a degree in English?*

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Retirements

Bonnie Costello earned a BA from Bennington and a PhD from Cornell before coming to BU in 1977. Since then, she has become one of the preeminent critics of modern and contemporary poetry in the United States. She made her name by publishing pioneering full-length books on Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop. Her more recent work includes *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape Poetry* (2003), *Planets on Tables: Poetry, Still Life, and the Turning World* (2008), and *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others* (2017). For these books, as well as for countless published articles, she has been awarded fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation—and that's just a partial list. She has served on the jury for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry four times and was elected to the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2004. At BU, Professor Costello received a Metcalf Award in 1994 and the United Methodist Teacher/Scholar Award in 2004 and was named William Fairfield Warren Distinguished Professor. With Professor Costello's retirement, the English Department is losing not only one of its most renowned scholars, but also a steadfast colleague, a publicly engaged critic, and a teacher who embodies the broad learning, inquisitiveness, and care that is the mark of a humanistic education.

After graduating from BU, I took a job in higher education administration at MIT because it let me work with individuals and organizations from around the world. While I was there, I gradually came to discover that I was passionate about environmental sustainability as an economic issue. So I decided to pursue my MBA.

I chose the Simmons MBA, an all women MBA program with a strong focus on principled leadership. I know that the skills I gained as an English major at BU contributed to my success in business school. Studying English honed my critical thinking skills, including my ability to analyze, see patterns, and synthesize information. All of these skills are essential to working with numbers and data.

After graduating, I found a job at a great NGO, the Environmental Defense Fund, where I currently work as an analyst. I love my job, in part because it's something I'm passionate about: I help organizations manage their energy and reduce their carbon footprint. Despite my early suspicion of math and numbers, I've become the resident data-nerd in my office. What I love most about numbers is finding creative ways to use data to tell a story. As an English major, I think I bring a unique perspective to my work.

My experience convinces me that students should choose a major that interests them. It's too much to ask students to figure out what they want to do with the rest of their lives when they are only eighteen, or even twenty-two. Pursue your passions, even as those passions change, and you will find yourself right where you are supposed to be.

Retirements

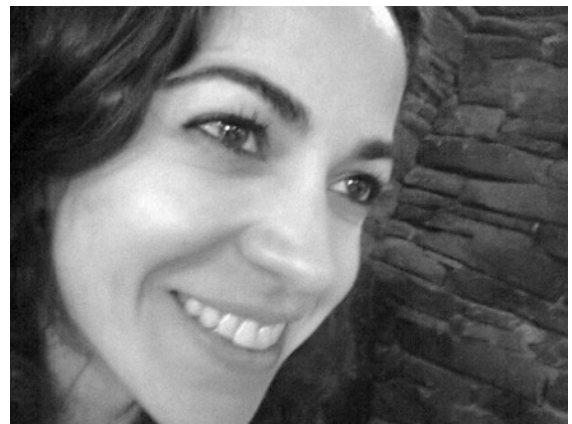
Robert Levine, the longest-serving member of the English Department, retired in spring 2018. Professor Levine graduated from Stuyvesant High School in 1950 and still proudly sings the school fight song to anyone who happens to ask. He finished a BA at City College in 1954 and from 1954 to 1956 worked in the US Army in Germany as a linguist, truck-driver, public information specialist, and armored infantryman. He returned to the US in 1957 and worked as a substitute teacher in New York City high schools before going to UC-Berkeley to do a Ph.D. in medieval literature, which he finished in 1963. With an abiding interest in translation and rhetoric, he began his academic career at Cornell in 1962 before moving to BU as an Assistant Professor in 1964, where he has taught a remarkable array of courses—not only classes that you would expect from a specialist in early British literature (Chaucer, *Piers Plowman*, Latin Literature, Old English, medieval epic and romance, and Shakespeare), but also courses on the nineteenth-century American novel, Joyce, Yeats, modern British fiction, and World Literature. Professor Levine's publications include a number of translations from French, Latin, and German medieval texts, as well as scholarly articles in major journals. As thousands of students over the years came to learn, he has a distinctive mixture of caustic wit and warm generosity, and his healthy distrust of authority is coupled with an intense capacity for friendship and camaraderie. Professor Levine will be missed around the halls of 236 Bay State Road.

Faculty Bookshelf: *The Matter of High Words: Naturalism, Normativity, and the Postwar Sage*, by Robert Chodat

Last fall, Oxford University Press published Rob Chodat's book *The Matter of High Words: Naturalism, Normativity, and the Postwar Sage*. The book discusses a group of twentieth-century and contemporary American authors—Walker Percy, Marilynne Robinson, Ralph Ellison, Stanley Cavell, and David Foster Wallace—whose writings move between art and argument, novelistic storytelling and philosophy. “The book was a way for me to explore some tensions in my own mind,” says Chodat. “Writers and critics for the last century have often been very hostile to overt moralizing and overt philosophizing. And for good reason—they resist sentimental or coercive ‘messages.’ I share that resistance, but also worry that it just reflects my own narrow assumptions about what makes ‘good art.’” According to Chodat, the authors addressed in his book wonder what gets lost when we segregate art from big ideas and moral judgment. “As writers,” he says, “they can be both ironic and earnest, oblique and assertive, full of doubt and full of hope. These are conflicting moods that define a lot of our lives.”

Pardis Dabashi on Her Work in Fiction and Film

Pardis Dabashi grew up in Philadelphia, New Jersey, and New York City. After earning her B.A. at Columbia University, she studied theater at the Ecole Jacques Lecoq and Ecole Phillippe Gaulier before joining the English Department at BU. She is currently an advanced doctoral student finishing her dissertation on how modern fiction and film abandon realist plots.



What drew you to doctoral study in general and to BU in particular?

I have an obsession with getting to the bottom of intellectual problems and questions, and to do so methodically, purposefully, and in conversation with others. There is a stereotype that scholarly life is reclusive and private, and to a certain extent that's true. But what we do is also profoundly social. We are talking to each other all the time, and we speak through the voices of brilliant writers and, in my case, filmmakers. What drew me to BU in particular was, without question, the incredible people here—students and professors. I couldn't imagine doing my graduate work anywhere else.

What do you find most fascinating about your research?

When my hunches are affirmed. I have a chapter on Faulkner's early fiction and another one in which I discuss a director from the 1920s and 1930s named Tod Browning. I suggest that the two approach similar narrative and historical questions from different angles and with different aesthetic consequences. During my research, I found out that Browning and Faulkner in fact knew one another and would take daily walks together when they were both working in Hollywood. Faulkner didn't usually forge friendships with people he met there, so this is a big deal and may help explain the connections I was sensing in their work.

Has your relationship to books and film changed since coming to BU?

Absolutely. I'd say that I'm more in awe of literature and film than I used to be. Looking back now, I think I came in with a kind of immaturity, as if I inhabited some high-ground over the works themselves, that I could "figure them out." Now I think great works of art are bottomless, and I feel very small in front of them, in a good way.

What was your single biggest challenge in your time here at BU?

When Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. Suddenly all of my work felt meaningless. But with time that sense of hopelessness wore off, and working on the dissertation helped me regain some sense of normalcy.

What's next for you?

I'm headed to Cornell to attend the School of Criticism and Theory, where I'll be attending a six-week intensive seminar on aesthetic theory. I'm a BU Center for the Humanities Dissertation Fellow for the Spring 2019 semester, and come Fall 2019, I'll be entering the daunting job market. I love and believe in the work I'm doing, and my hope is that I'll be able to continue to do it.

Retirements

Bill Loizeaux came to the English department as a Writer-in-Residence in the fall of 2012 after a decade and a half on the creative writing faculty at Johns Hopkins University. Over the last six years, he has taught workshops on a broad range of topics, including the writing of fiction, the writing of non-fiction essays, and the writing of memoirs. At BU, he annually taught two advanced workshops in creative non-fiction that filled an important gap in our curriculum and for which there is a distinct thirst among students. His publications span a remarkable variety of genres—short stories, essays, op-eds, novels for young adults, novels for children, and multiple highly regarded memoirs. Though he was at BU for a relatively short period, Bill's curiosity, engagement, and thoughtfulness made him a much loved teacher and colleague.

Faculty Bookshelf: *The Novel After Film: Modernism and the Decline of Autonomy*, by Jonathan Foltz

January 2018 marked the release of Jonathan Foltz's first book, *The Novel After Film: Modernism and the Decline of Autonomy* (Oxford University Press), an examination of the relationship between film history and the history of the modern novel. Foltz argues that a number of writers—including Virginia Woolf, H. D., Henry Green, and Aldous Huxley—turned to the burgeoning culture of narrative cinema in order to identify new forms of storytelling. "Many of our assumptions about media history are linear and rather apocalyptic," remarks Foltz. "We think: first came the novel, then came film, then came television, then came the computer, etc. But the reality is much more irregular, much more interesting. I wanted to investigate this irregular history of the novel after film, the history of an anxiety about how writers fit into an unfolding history of media." For Foltz, modern novels exhibit a distressed fascination with what can't be written and what the public expects from literature. What kinds of novels resulted from such fascination? "Weird, conflicted, impossible books," Foltz says. "My favorite kind."