

# IN WRITING

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Assistant Professor Zsuzsanna Palmer (Photo: Nora Varga)

## Professor Palmer Receives “Diversity and Inclusion” Award

Lilly Crossley

In a world where technology is constantly evolving and growing, it is important to have it accessible for everyone, including those with disabilities. Assistant Professor Zsuzsanna Palmer, who has been a faculty member at GVSU since 2014, has conducted research and designed collaboration projects related to creating websites that are more accessible for people with disabilities. Palmer’s work was recognized by the Association for Business Communication (ABC) and she was presented with the 2021 “Distinction in the Practice of Diversity and Inclusion Award;” the award was shared between her and her long-time research partner.

Sushil Oswal, a Professor at the University of Washington, received the

ABC award alongside Palmer for their collaborative work. In addition to their shared research projects, the specific project presented for this award involved the collaboration of their own students, along with students from Hungary, to learn more about website accessibility. The process begins when the students from Hungary come up with potential business ideas, for which the students from GVSU create websites. The students from Washington act as the accessibility advisors and make sure the business plans and websites are more accessible. All the students work together and are responsible for each other, making sure what they create is acceptable because people from all over the world can see

*SEE PALMER AWARD ON PAGE 15*

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## This is Our Way to Write

Torianna Marasco



“  
I wanted to write  
about what was  
true and difficult...  
I began writing  
to make a point  
of view of people  
and cultures that I  
never saw or read  
or watched.”

Sejal Shah (photo: Sejal Shah)

“You can’t make the reader care, but you can, as Shah does, invite them to care and challenge them to care,” Associate Professor Amarak Huey complimented as he introduced Sejal Shah in the Nonfiction Writers Series Event presented by GVSU’s Writing Department through Zoom. Huey hosted readings this semester for students and faculty to attend. It was an opportunity to hear from successful writers, like Shah, and ask questions to help them improve their own writing.

Sejal Shah is the author of *This Is One Way to Dance* (2020), a collection of 25 essays she wrote over a 20-year period. Her fearlessness and willingness to admit uncertainty is admirable. “I wanted to write about what was true and difficult... I began writing to make a point of view of people and cultures that I never saw or read or watched.”

Her poetic sentences and impeccable attention to detail are evident in her collection that reflects

her views of culture, family, language, and place. Shah mentioned that although it is nonfiction writing, many of the essays resemble poetry and fiction. She commented, “Not everyone will agree on what your writing is categorized as, but it’s important to know how you feel about it.”

Before the reading began, she invited the audience to stretch and take a couple deep breaths. “Readings are performances,” she cheered and began reading “Skin,” the concentrated essay discussed during the event. Explaining her challenges as an Indian woman, it was clear that this emotional piece was not an easy read, even after she wrote it several years ago. “This was actually something I wrote when I was working towards my MFA. It was my only way to write about myself and how I could talk about my issues. I still consider it fiction because it’s too hard to put myself back in that

place.” Adding on to her comment, she mentioned, “My writing isn’t just for me.” She wants others to understand that it is adequate to feel however they feel. Shah mentioned that there are parts of the essay she still feels uncomfortable talking about, but it was real and true to the moment, which is exactly what her writing represents.

After some attentively read essays, the audience was allowed to ask Shah any questions they may have had. One participant asked, “Do you have any advice for beginning nonfiction writers?” Her detailed list included journaling, meeting deadlines/doing assignments, paying attention to your surroundings, and taking a walk every day. “Keep in mind that the topic doesn’t have to be told, you can write about anything true whether someone else can understand what it’s about or not,” she finished.

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*“It’s important that  
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later.”*

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Shah’s confidence is inspiring, especially to young writers. She sets a good example that writing can sincerely be whatever the writer wants it to be. Shah concluded, “It’s important that you write for yourself first and you can figure out the rest later.”



## New Faculty Profile: Samantha Dine

Alex Verheek



Affiliate Professor Samantha Dine (photo: Samantha Dine)

Affiliate Professor Samantha Dine's office is located in Lake Ontario Hall, on the second floor. The door is ajar, a welcoming invitation for students coming in looking for advice, answers to homework questions, or just a friendly chat. Dine immediately makes me feel welcomed as I enter the room, despite this being our first time meeting in person.

As I sit down, we get to talking about her role at GVSU. Dine is newly an affiliate professor at GVSU but that does not mean that she is new to the school. Not only did she graduate from GVSU as an undergraduate, she has also been teaching here in various roles for the past seven years. This year, Dine is teaching WRT 350: Business Communication, as well as WRT 120: Strategies in Writing - Stretch I.

Things have changed at GVSU, however, with classes returning to in-person this semester, the transition from online classes has been difficult for both students and

faculty alike. Dine acknowledges the disconnect that resulted from the lack of engagement in online classes and how that has transferred over into in-person classes as a hurdle that will need to be cleared. "It went from famine to feast," she remarks, referring to her transition from having all online courses last semester to all in-person this semester.

Despite the patches of difficulty, Dine is much happier to be in-person and to be able to connect more effectively with her students. To Dine, there is nothing more important than students connecting to the class material as well as connecting with each other.

"The main thing that I like to cultivate in my classroom is community and connection," Dine says, reflecting her commitment to her students. Continuing, she talks about how she wants to break down the traditional teacher-student relationship, that she wants her students to see her as an approachable

person rather than an inaccessible outsider. Dine tries to create a space where all of her students know each other. After a year of online learning, many students and faculty are feeling a palpable lack of connection in the classroom, but Dine is fighting against this. "When you're a part of the class we're working together, we're having conversations. It becomes personal, you know your classmates, they know you. We have an interpersonal relationship between professor and student."

It is clear that Dine wants her students to expand their horizons beyond the content they learn in the classroom. In addition to teaching at GVSU, Dine is also involved in the Writing Department's study abroad program, where she serves as a co-director. The Writing Department was planning to go to Cape Town, South Africa in 2020, but due to COVID-19 the program had been postponed. Dine is hopeful that they will be able to go in 2023. According to Dine, it was always a regret of hers that she never participated in study abroad as a student, so this trip will give her the opportunity to expand her cultural horizons in addition to helping her students do the same.

Even as Dine is working back into the routine of teaching in-person classes after the chaotic change-ups that were caused by the pandemic last year, she is optimistic that this year will go well, for her students and for herself. As we all are trying to get used to this new normal, Dine is focused on bringing back the community aspect of teaching into her classrooms and educating her students in a positive, welcoming space where they can grow as writers and individuals.

# Designing an Effective Writing Course: Faculty Learning at GVSU

Jared Sweet



Assistant Professor Jerry Stinnett (photo: Ummayair Ahmad)

Writing can be a skill many students struggle to learn, but teachers are working on campus to better integrate writing in their courses. This fall at GVSU Assistant Professor Jerry Stinnett, a writing professor at GVSU and the Director of the Supplemental Writing Skills program, chose to facilitate a faculty learning community that aims to help faculty discuss how to best teach writing in their discipline. The learning community ran from September to November and included professors in many different fields that teach supplemental writing skills courses. It is a considerable time investment, but, as Professor Stinnett said, he is “always trying to find a way to get the faculty something in return for putting in the work.”

It is rare that students at GVSU get to see some of the things that happen on campus with professors, so I took

the chance to ask Stinnett about the Faculty Teaching and Learning Center (FTLC). He told me the main function of the Center is “putting faculty together to use their expertise to help each other.” The FTLC at GVSU is located in Zumberge Hall and Stinnett says he has had nothing but positive experiences working with the Center. Learning communities, like this one, are hosted through the Center and the one being facilitated by Stinnett was created so that he could use his experience teaching writing to help SWS professors better integrate writing into their courses.

Although many view SWS courses as having a writing emphasis and a section of content related to the actual subject, Stinnett says, “if we could demystify how writing works in these disciplines, every student would have a chance to succeed and the education at GVSU would be more equitable.” Part of that process is teaching students the differences between writing in their discipline and other forms of writing. A student should approach writing a lab report differently than how they should approach literary analysis, and Stinnett wanted to emphasize that in the SWS learning community.

According to Stinnett, another focus of this learning community was teaching a way that allows students to be motivated about their work. “When we talked about what motivates us to do the revisions . . . it came down to us valuing what we’re writing.” After reflecting on why they endure the writing process, many of the professors began to think about ways they could rework assignments so that students value what they are writing.

Professors reflecting on how they do things in the classroom, such as

how their assignments are written, excites Stinnett about the learning community. Professors from several disciplines like political science, sociology, and art history in the community were all able to unpack what it means to write in their courses through these group meetings. I asked Stinnett what this means to him and rather simply he said, “I’m excited to see faculty get excited about things they can do.”

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I followed up with another professor attending this learning community to ask him what he thought of it. Thomas Walker, an Associate Professor of political science with an SWS course, has been attending for most of the meetings and says “Jerry has orchestrated a pleasant and thought-provoking faculty learning community.” He told me that the learning community has helped him consider a few things he had not considered before, and a major takeaway has been how he approaches peer review in the classroom. Although hearing from Stinnett conveyed to me his care for the learning community, Walker’s similar feelings further reassures me that our professors are doing what they can to make education at GVSU even better.



## Faculty Writers: Collaborating Effectively

Chiara Nicholas



Associate Professor Amorak Huey (photo: Professor Huey)

“Let yourself live in the mess” is something we can all take to heart within an evolving pandemic and “post-pandemic” environment we have been living in since March 2020. However, this profound statement from Associate Professor Amorak Huey was actually in a discussion about writing, especially when we might feel scattered between multiple projects. Huey’s advice: trust yourself that if the project is important enough, you will find the inspiration to come back to it when the time is right.

Huey and Associate Professor Todd Kaneko have been hard at work the last couple years, accomplishing multiple projects with more to come and have trusted their own writing processes to work collaboratively, living in the mess that is, essentially, the creative process.

One project that has clearly found importance for Huey is his latest book of poetry, *Dad Jokes: From Late in the Patriarchy*, published in May 2021. Thinking about how fathers get their idea of what it means to be a dad for pop-sitcom figures made him realize that he also based a lot of his thoughts on this topic from



Associate Professor W. Todd Kaneko (photo: W. Todd Kaneko)

television. With this book, he wanted to find a way of talking about this subject through poetry. The book centers around themes of masculinity, gender expression, and gun violence. He believes that it is important to challenge the dominant, mainstream ideas about what it means to be a man and father because masculine behavior often goes unquestioned. There are so many ways to be a good father, and some of the expected ones might actually be toxic, so this book aimed to offer a reflection of the male perspective on those masculine stereotypes.

Along with this new book of poetry, Huey has juggled writing a chapbook of poetry, or a short book of poetry, written collaboratively with Kaneko. The collaboration between these two professors and writers was a perfect match: both are fathers and understand the struggle of juggling projects in general and within the pandemic environment; “childcare was a big part of that,” Kaneko states. They also have very similar writing styles; writing one poem at a time and seeing what that poem leads to, without a final project in mind. This relates to Huey’s advice of embracing

the messy process of creative projects and trusting that process to lead you somewhere, rather than focusing on that end goal from the start.

Their chapbook of poetry, *Slash/Slash*, has been in an on-and-off development for about four years and was published in June, 2021, later winning the chapbook prize for Diode Books. The initial idea for this project began when they both realized they had written several poems about music, a few of those related to the band Guns N’ Roses. Slash is the lead guitarist of this famous rock band and many of the poems in this chapbook are in his voice, so it was fitting that his name was used for the title. As they continued writing poems and bouncing ideas off each other with the content of those poems, they noticed that about a third of the poems were in Axl Rose’s voice, lead singer of Guns N’ Roses.

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*“[Collaboration] taught us to let go of ‘this is my poem’ or ‘your poem.’ These are our poems.”*

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Huey and Kaneko have a long history of working together, which allowed them to build a level of trust and understanding of each other’s poetry styles: two key aspects when looking for a partner to collaborate with. They are in a poetry writing group together and have been trading poems for many years, beyond their joint positions as writing faculty here

SEE *FACULTY WRITERS* ON PAGE 15

## New Faculty Profile: Rori Meyer

*Kailey Parkins*



*“ I am very proud of my pedagogy...I feel like I have gotten to a really good place in regards to giving WRT 150 students feedback.”*

*Visiting Professor Rori Meyer (photo: Rori Meyer)*

Visiting Professor Rori Meyer has been in the writing scene for nearly her entire life and she discovered her passion for writing in the second grade. After she wrote a story in which her main character got stuck in an elevator in the Amway Grand Hotel, her teacher was so inspired by her piece that she nominated Meyer for a “Young Authors” award. It was not only this that jump-started her career-long pursuit in teaching and writing — and what ultimately led to her employment at GVSU — but also her love for the community she grew up in. “I grew up in Hudsonville, MI,” she began, “so it’s always been a fixture of my life...I love the community here. This especially became true later in my undergrad career when I entered the writing program.”

*“... I love the community here. This especially became true later in my undergrad career when I entered the writing program.”*

After attending GVSU, she decided to pursue a career as a professor, first starting in 2015 as an adjunct professor where she taught WRT 150: Strategies in Writing for six years. She expressed her love for teaching first-year writing because of the chance to break new writers of some bad habits they learned in high school. “Yes, your introduction can be more than one paragraph,” she continues, “your thesis can be more than one sentence. Indeed, you can use first and second person in your writing.”

One of Meyer’s personal accomplishments is her exemplary interactions with her students. Instead of giving hand-written notes or digital comments, she meets virtually with all of her students individually. This benefits both Meyer and her students, as they each learn to grow more comfortable with each other and individually critique, and together, formulate a writing strategy unique to each student. Meyer plans to continue this in the future, saying, “I’m very proud of my pedagogy. It is a continual work in progress, but in this, my 10th year of teaching, I feel

like I have gotten to a really good place in regards to giving my WRT 150 students feedback.”

It is at this moment she begins to discuss GVSU’s Writing Department and its community as a whole. She expresses that the Writing Department at GVSU is special, adding that she is confident in this characterization due to her adjunction with a few other universities as well. Meyer says, “I believe the uniqueness of the GVSU program stems from its focus on writing in its rhetorical form — it really elevates the conversations when you’re considering all the options real-life writers choose from.”

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As for her future plans involving the Writing Department, Meyer has a few — but it is crystal clear, as she speaks highly of her WRT 150 students, that she will continue to work hard to both motivate and inspire them to reach for their highest potential. She intends to extend her kindness and wisdom to her students, and for her presence to have a positive impact at GVSU for many years to come.



# COVID-19 and Writing: Where are We Now?

Sydney Trepeck



Associate Professor Amy Ferdinandt Stolley (photo: Amy Ferdinandt Stolley)

March 11, 2020 will be a day that forever lives in the history books. On this day, GVSU classes were moved online and in turn, derailed the entire school year to accommodate for an unheard of quarantine. Meanwhile, the 2020-2021 school year was anything but normal. Even though the Writing Department had classes in a variety of styles, it did not feel like a “normal” school year. However, on August 30, 2021, writing classes slowly but surely started to head back to being in person. While the COVID-19 mandates are still important, there is also more engagementsparkingmorediscussion. The real question is... where are we now? Staff and students alike have had varying experiences and the statements provided are a sample of the sentiments regarding the pandemic and writing for the 2021-2022 school year.

Associate Professor Amy Ferdinandt Stolley stated that the adjustment from online to in-person was tricky. She was interacting with more people on the first day of the Fall 2021 semester than she has been

in the past 16 months. Stolley also mentioned that compared to last year, her students were not as interested in writing about anything related to the pandemic. Despite the adjustment, she incorporated various practices from online learning into the regular classroom environment, some of which include announcements about the upcoming week and allowing students to choose how they want to do office hours (in person versus virtually). As far as students are concerned, she has noticed that the adjustment has been all over the place. “Some students have adjusted really well and were able to adapt while others are still adjusting from COVID-19 related effects.”

Affiliate Professor Samantha Dine has stated that a lot of changes have been made, not only in the classroom, but with faculty members as well. One of the most prominent changes being that faculty members were interested in hearing about each other’s experiences as everyone is still figuring out how to teach in a typical classroom setting again. Dine felt very comfortable being back in

the classroom, especially with strict vaccination and mask mandates. She also stated that there has been more interest with her students wanting to write about COVID-19 related topics as opposed to last year. She has also included topics related to the pandemic in her WRT 350: Business Communications class. In the case of her first year writing classes, “COVID-19 related subjects came up organically through classroom discussions”.

In the case of students, this has also been a major discussion point as COVID-19 has affected many of them in terms of their writing classes as well as in the Writing Center. The Writing Center has also seen a number of changes because of the virus in comparison to school years that took place before COVID-19 was in our verbiage. Natalie Lambert, a sophomore and first year writing consultant, stated that “there is more of a ‘normal’ show because we can see more students in person.” The Writing Center experience is more hybrid this year and has a larger reach. When comparing her experiences in-person versus virtual she has also stated that, “In person, we see a lot of first year students, and virtually we have a lot of grad students.”

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*“Some students have adjusted really well and were able to adapt while others are still adjusting from COVID-19 related effects.”*

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In the past 16 months, this has greatly influenced the Writing Center  
SEE COVID-19 NOW ON PAGE 16

# A Healing Conversation with Deesha Philyaw

Greg Carlson



Deesha Philyaw (photo: Deesha Philyaw)

Deesha Philyaw's voice sounds almost exactly as I thought it would. I already have some exposure to *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* after a recent class assignment. After reading only a few words, I knew I was reading something important. Each word carried so much weight. Each turn of phrase was a blessing. So when I learned that she would be reading and discussing excerpts for the Grand Valley Writers Series Fiction Event, I tried my best not to openly beg for the assignment.

This is the first such reading I attended, so was not entirely sure what to expect. But there I was in my best shirt and favorite pajama pants, signed into Zoom with giddy anticipation. Event coordinator and Associate Professor Amorak Huey began by introducing Kai Greenblatt, a fellow student who proceeded with a wonderful introduction for Philyaw that captured her work quite beautifully. Out of the many lines that made me nod furiously in accord, Philyaw's own favorite, is the description of her work as a "plate of comfort food and a knife to the heart." I could not have said it better myself.

One would expect that the writer of a celebrated, award-winning debut short story collection (that is already

being adapted by HBO) might enter a space with at least some degree of well-deserved self-importance. But Philyaw's power lies largely in her grounding and her crystal-clear perspective. Completely unassuming, her lovely smile and fantastic glasses betray her warmth and personable spirit before she even has a chance to speak. Then she speaks anyway, and the blessings pour forth.

After reflecting on her love of the connection and mutual encouragement that events such as this provide, she proved their value with an abundance of little treasures. She shared candid insight into her own writing processes, most notably that she does not typically outline stories, and that her process changes with each project. We learned about how she views herself as a writer, and how she developed the themes for this book. Much of the work is based on personal observations of church ladies in her own life. On her overall writing goals, she shared that "I hope my work raises questions to start healing conversations." I think her wish is already coming true. Then she began her reading, and the blessings pour forth once more.

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*"I hope my work raises questions to start healing conversations."*

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Passages crackle and fizz with an electric hum as she spoke each word like an incantation from a holy book. Her voice was calm and her tone was friendly, almost familiar. But the poignance and potency of her words pierce through so many levels of the human experience at once that it startled me. The juxtaposition is disorienting. And it would be impossible to overstate the subtext in her work; each careful word

choice burst with implications. Themes of nostalgia, displacement, exhaustion, grief, race, religion, sex, and beyond all shine forth brilliantly. I got the sense that she writes for people who feel trapped; it is her way of celebrating any and all ways that she observes them pushing back. I found myself enthralled.

When the time came for questions, I was eager to ask my own. I struggled to balance the notes for this article with the notes I took for myself. "Some overwriting is necessary — just get it out, then trim it back... Say as much as you can in as few words as possible... Trust your reader." There was also plenty of business advice, but my personal favorite tidbit was something that Philyaw picked up from Debra Dickerson: "Stop worrying about getting published and start worrying about getting better at writing." I cannot express how valuable and encouraging all of this advice was for me.

I would recommend attending as many Writers Series events as you can. You will leave feeling inspired. And do not forget to buy a copy of *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies*. I promise you will hear Deesha Philyaw's own voice as you read it, and her words will bless you, too.



Deesha Philyaw's book (photo: Deesha Philyaw)



# DeVasto's "Living with PFAS" Project Connects Communities

*Alora Bowers*

Storytelling is an artform that brings a personal edge to a world that is filled with technical scientific facts, which can often be difficult for the general public to understand. Assistant Professor Dani DeVasto is a faculty member at GVSU who is invested in telling personal stories that can transform the scientific world. DeVasto's research focuses on the current need for effective communication between the general public and experts, finding ways in which these two groups can interact and support each other. Her focus is put in action with her latest oral history project, "Living with PFAS".

Per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, are a group of man made chemicals that are used in just about anything. They are resistant to water, oil, and heat. In recent years, these chemicals have been found in the environment and in drinking water, including at a site in Kent County. While there has been quite a bit of research on PFAS that focuses on the technical aspects of the chemicals, there is not as much discourse about the effects of these chemicals on the environment and public. Regarding this lack of discourse, DeVasto says that, "We are missing the human element and only hear part of the story." After speaking with colleagues, such as Dr. Rick Rediske at GVSU who is involved in efforts to educate and remediate the impacts of PFAS, DeVasto decided to start the project "Living with PFAS" based on her own observations made while starting to learn about local PFAS issues.

"Living with PFAS" collects stories from anyone willing to share about their experience with PFAS and how it has affected their lives. It highlights a powerfully personal side of the conversation that often gets overlooked in traditional scientific

research. Much of the project consists of video or audio recordings of people relating their experiences with PFAS. DeVasto shared that when the public is exposed to stories from those they can see or hear from, it makes a deeper lasting connection than reading a study or research paper might. This helps bridge the gap between science and the public by sharing stories that connect with the ethos of humans and encourages them to learn more about the problem at hand. She has spoken with a plethora of people including scientists studying PFAS, firefighters who are surrounded by these chemicals, Senator Winnie Brinks who has been a major advocate for PFAS legislation in Kent County, and even residents who have noticed the effects of PFAS in animals. DeVasto's project emphasizes that all of these voices hold equal value when making decisions about our environment

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*"What do they [the audience] know? How is that different from an expert? What do people care about? What motivates them?"*

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This just goes to show how important effective writing and communication is in the world. Personal stories can have a massive impact on how the listener or reader views things in life. They can also encourage audiences to learn about subjects they might have otherwise not been exposed to. DeVasto says, "scientific topics can sometimes be inaccessible to the public because of



*Assistant Professor Dani DeVasto (photo: Dani DeVasto)*

their technical content and language."

More and more researchers and experts are seeking out talented writers who can help them connect with the general public and increase awareness by using more accessible language. My conversation with DeVasto made me realize how significant it is to maintain effective communication and also how integral our roles as writers really are.

However, DeVasto believes that just changing the language might not always be enough. She says that, "The language might be super accessible, but if the message isn't taking into account what people care about, what matters to them, then it makes it harder to engage." DeVasto emphasizes putting yourself into the role of the audience and asking questions such as "What do they know? How is that different from an expert? What do people care about? What motivates them?" That way, we can create more access to scientific knowledge by not only changing the language, but by taking these different perspectives into consideration as well. "I think this is where stories come in." DeVasto concludes, perfectly

*SEE PFAS ON PAGE 16*

## New Faculty Profile: Dominic Nanni

Cassandra Schiebner

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*This is why rhetoric was for centuries viewed as the most important of the humanistic disciplines. It is total! All encompassing! EVERYTHING!*

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Visiting Professor Dominic Nanni (photo: Dominic Nanni)

Visiting Professor Dominic Nanni realized his passion for writing at two different points in his life. The first was during President Barack Obama's speech on election night, the first election he had ever voted in. He recalls feeling fascinated by the words. "I remember being captivated by his speech, by the power of words and by President Obama's careful use of rhetoric as a political art," Nanni explains. The second was while he was enrolled in his PhD in rhetoric and composition, and was attending a graduate seminar on Plato's Republic. This seminar ultimately led him in the direction of studying classical rhetoric and political philosophy.

When Nanni saw the opportunity posted to be a Visiting Professor of Writing at GVSU, he took a look at the writing curriculum and was thoroughly impressed. "It looked like somewhere I would want to teach and work," he says, adding that GVSU is also close to his family. "It just seemed like the perfect fit." Nanni also noted that his sister attended GVSU many years ago, so his prior memories are scarce, but he has been making amazing new memories here. "I have caught myself falling in love

with this campus...It's beautiful and welcoming."

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*"It [GVSU] just seemed like the perfect fit."*

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Currently teaching WRT 120: Strategies in Writing - Stretch I and 130: Strategies in Writing - Stretch II, Nanni has also taught other writing courses at Wayne State University as a PhD student and Graduate Teaching Assistant. "At WSU, I taught everything from first-year writing to the English Department's introduction to rhetoric course," he recalls. Instructing such a wide range of classes prepared him for his courses at GVSU, and aided in developing his own personal teaching style. His teaching style is one that stems from encouragement and positivity, as he will start the first few weeks of the semester by convincing students that they are good writers, even if their past high school English teachers tried to tell them otherwise. "My favorite moment is when students finally realize that they have things worth saying and that they can write them

down," he notes.

If Nanni could tell everyone one thing about writing, other than the fact that you can write, is that the writing process is not linear. "Rhetoric," he explains, "of which writing is one part, is the work of "bold" and "imaginative" minds; and that the process of writing or speaking follows a path that is more creative than linear. The writing process is messy. It isn't a formula or a mathematical exercise." Rhetoric, which is the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, is very important to Nanni and is a central idea that he has studied for quite a long time. When asked about his favorite quote, he provided a passage from Richard Weaver's essay "The Phaedrus and the Nature of Rhetoric," which is a piece that has always spoken to him. "All of the terms in a rhetorical vocabulary are like links in a chain stretching up to some master link which transmits its influence down through the linkages. It is impossible to talk about rhetoric as effective expression without having it as a term giving intelligibility to the whole discourse, the Good." Professor Nanni says that rhetoric, when properly configured, is an education of a person's entirety and, "an art that reflects the totality of someone in terms of their morals and ideals." To Nanni, rhetoric is everything. "This is why rhetoric was for centuries viewed as the most important of the humanistic disciplines. It is total! All encompassing! EVERYTHING!"

All in all, Nanni believes that while rhetoric is an incredibly powerful tool in writing and life, the most important thing in the classroom is to remind the student writers that they do have something meaningful to say, and they can write it down in a compelling way.



# A Space in the World: The Poetry of Sumita Chakraborty and Nandi Comer

*Katherine Heil*



*Nandi Comer and Sumita Chakraborty (photo: Katherine Heil)*

The event starts off with technological confusion. It is to be expected; this fall semester's Grand Valley Writers Series is the first reading of the two visiting poets to be done in-person since January of 2020. It was in this return from the digital confines of Zoom back into this 3D space that the poets performed their works.

Introduced by GVSU student Jackson Boisvert, Sumita Chakraborty is a visiting professor at University of Michigan, a published author of a collection of poems titled *Arrow*, and the winner of several fellowship awards. In her readings, she speaks as an abuse survivor on the art of taking up space and letting it go, saying that "Marigolds," the first poem read, is about the "interplay of specificity and the big space the poem gestures to," focusing on a barrage of names and images as it races through the months. The first two poems, from *Arrow*, reflect on her younger, crueler self grasping at opportunities with a white-knuckled grip. Chakraborty says that the poems came from a former teacher's advice: the speaker of a poem does not have to be perfect. That idea allowed her to acknowledge

her regrets alongside her triumphs.

*Arrow's* very format also explores space, overwhelming the reader with long, detailed poems before prefacing shorter, no less poignant ones. This was serendipity—the longer poems were written at first "because it's fun!" Chakraborty also reinforces the taking of space in her performance; she never quite shouted, but her voice filled the room and commanded our attention all the same. As Boisvert says, "'Marigolds' slapped the reader in the face and said 'look at me.'"

Nandi Comer—introduced by Rachel Denton with Comer's own quote: "When I am not writing about Detroit, Detroit, like a squirrel, will creep up behind me and sit in my poems."—is a twice-published author (*American Family: A Syndrome* and *Tapping Out*) and winner of several awards and fellowships. The three poems she performed come from *Tapping Out*, a work centered around Mexico and a fascination with *Lucha Libres* that sparked there. Her poems have to do with space, too, speaking on the struggles of taking the space a person is given—in her case, as a Black woman with Black nationalist parents—and discovering new words

for it abroad and addressing that space with them.

Her second poem is "another Detroit poem," exploring her need to both return to and run away from her home. The use of the Mexican myth *La Llorona* to personify Detroit speaks to Comer's use of a culture that she initially believes she can't write about "because it isn't where I'm from," to explore the one she exists in. In her poetry are odes to *Lucha Libre*, the first and third poems visceral recountings of their preformative yet real violence. As she says: "No one asks if *Cirque du Soleil* is fake." Illustrating the flexing, oiled bodies of the wrestlers crashing together, the performance, her poem claims, is the point. "Sangre, Sangre, Sangre" breathlessly explains that the violence acts as a unifying force for its fans. With these ideas, Comer takes the *Luchadores'* masks and holds them up to the rest of the world, finding the likenesses.

In the closing questions segment, both poets are asked about the writing process, both generally and within the pandemic (both poets read what they referred to as "pandemic poems"; Chakraborty, with consternation, having "promised myself I wasn't going to write one."). On the pandemic affecting their writing: Chakraborty believes that it was not her writing that was affected, but her way of thinking itself. For Comer, the sudden intrusion of her work life into her home was the largest effect. On doubt as a part of the writing process: Comer reveals that she worries about giving her chosen topics their due. To fight those fears? She "fully [gives] myself over to the way I decide to write about this." Both emphasize that writers looking to write well should find a community of like-minded people willing to both support and critique each other with all they have.

## Gaining Perspective: Writing Intern Job Offer

*Paige Bodine*

Toria Keyes always had a passion for writing. During her time at GVSU, she surrounded herself with anything writing-related; she worked for the on-campus Writing Center and was an assistant editor for the fiction section of the student magazine, fishladder: A Student Journal of Art and Writing. Keyes majored in Writing and minored in Human Rights and loved her time at GVSU. She was set to graduate on August 11th, 2020, but needed an internship, which was hard to come by due to the competitive nature of her hometown Chicago, and the COVID-19 pandemic shutting down and changing every business. Most businesses were struggling to stay afloat, and combined with the world of online learning, it was difficult to find an internship in the winter semester. After the realization of the sparsity of internships and the understanding that she needed one immediately, she felt the disparity of the situation. Luckily, a friend of Keyes was able to help with finding a last minute internship in Grand Rapids that could provide her with valuable writing experience.

"I confided in one of my friends about how badly I wanted an internship," Keyes said. "She mentioned that she was applying for Our Daily Bread Ministries, we both applied and ended up getting positions at Our Daily Bread. That shows the power of communication and knowing people."

Keyes demonstrated how the combination of strong motivation, work ethic, sheer will, going out of one's comfort zone, and flexibility when things do not go as planned, can lead to success. Putting herself out on the job market when there seemed to be no opportunities and having open conversations with others lead Keyes to have an interview with Our Daily Bread. When reflecting on the interview process, Keyes recalled how

confidence and using any experience gained throughout college was an important factor in receiving the position. The internship was an exciting experience and opportunity for Keyes. Getting the experience to put her writing skills to use, for a company that she believed in, was a dream come true.

The internship was an editorial and social media internship where the main responsibilities included editing manuscripts, as well as a plethora of other duties. "I got to read a book and edit a book about the second Black Miss America, Debbye Turner Bell," said Keyes when describing her internship. "I also did some legal work and created contracts and sent them to writers. Additionally, I was the transcriber in the board meetings. As an intern, I felt I was the most involved in editing manuscripts."

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*"This internship and the Writing Department have helped me grow as both an individual and a writer."*

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Keyes attributes the Writing Department as a monumental influence on her writing and her confidence when using both verbal and written communication. She saw both forms of communication working hand-in-hand. When reflecting on how GVSU's Writing Department helped her develop her writing, Keyes said, "I was really good at writing out my thoughts, but when it came to verbalizing it was a challenge because I am an internal processor. The Writing Department gave me the practice of explaining my writing and having a spoken discussion about my work," said Keyes. "When interning,



Toria Keyes (photo: Toria Keyes)

I had to communicate with others, verbally and advocate for myself, and speak up on certain things."

The importance of solid writing with verbal communication skills was something that Keyes recognized when reflecting on the program. Another benefit of the Writing Department that Keyes acknowledged was the sense of community that the program offered. "I liked the collaboration of the Writing Department and working on stories. The critiques that we had in the Writing Department were at first intimidating," Keyes said. "They actually ended up being really valuable because I got to see how invested my classmates were in my writing."

When Keyes' internship ended she decided to stay with Our Daily Bread Ministries and started working full-time as a transcriber and correspondent, with some added social media responsibilities. She gets to witness firsthand the influence that Our Daily Bread has on customers and continues practicing her passion: writing. "This internship and the Writing Department have helped me grow as both an individual and a

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# New Faculty Profile: Emma Carlton

*Hannah Derwent*

Visiting Professor Emma Carlton is excited to jump into her first full-time teaching position at GVSU. Carlton completed her undergraduate degree in writing at GVSU and then her master's in creative writing at the University of New Orleans.

Originally, she chose GVSU because of the proximity, but discovered she really clicked with the department. "It slowly dawned on me that it [the Writing Department] was actually wonderful," Carlton said. While choosing to teach at GVSU was also a matter of proximity, Carlton's undergraduate experience strongly influenced the decision; "I love this Writing Department! I wanted to work for it; I wanted to have these amazing professors that I had when I was younger as colleagues."

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*"I love this Writing Department! I wanted to work for it; I wanted to have these amazing professors that I had when I was younger as colleagues."*

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The way GVSU's Writing Department approaches writing added to the appeal of the position. Carlton appreciates how collaborative and communicative everyone in the department is as they work towards a common goal of promoting good writing. She also appreciates that this department focuses on content and critical thinking as opposed to perfect grammar or punctuation.

When she was not in school,

Carlton worked as a waitress writing short stories on the side. Her preferred genre to read is fantasy, and for the last two years she has been reading mostly fantasy novels by women of color. "I realized somewhere in grad school that everyone I'd ever read was a white guy, and so I started really actively fighting against that." She also enjoys reading speculative fiction and could teach a whole class on N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth Trilogy*. When Carlton writes, it is usually fiction where she will write anything from short realistic fiction, which she wrote for her master's thesis, to fantasy novels about dragons.

Carlton is hoping with her first full-time teaching position she will have more time for her writing as her previous teaching experience, working as a TA in graduate school and adjuncting at Muskegon Community College, did not allow her much. This semester, Carlton is teaching WRT 120: Strategies in Writing - Stretch I, a position she had not originally envisioned herself in. She has discovered, however, that the students there are more interactive and engaged than she is used to and she has

enjoyed having more flexibility with the slowed down pace of the class. Carlton has found she really enjoys teaching first year writing, especially narrative and argumentative writing, but if given the opportunity to create a new class she would want it to have a focus on speculative fiction: a genre she was eager to study but could never find a course in.

For those entering college, Carlton suggests asking lots of questions and staying engaged in class. "You see these movies where you go to college, and you're in this big lecture hall, and you can just take a nap and nobody ever notices. So a lot of people come to college thinking that you don't have to, like you can just kind of take college in rather than being active in it. And I think that really doesn't work in this class." For anyone looking to take WRT 120: Strategies in Writing - Stretch I, Carlton highly recommends keeping a planner or notebook specifically for the class and to come in with an open mind.



Visiting Professor Emma Carlton (photo: Professor Kylie Jacobsen)

# A Professor and an Alumni: Two Perspectives on the Distinction in Writing

Audrey Kelly



“

*It's a good reminder of what you're actually capable of...*

”

*D. Cole Eichelberger (photo: D. Cole Eichelberger)*

As a writer, there are many opportunities through classes and clubs to write and participate in the writing community. The time and energy invested in writing are substantial, and although the payoff of a finished project is rewarding in itself, many activities can also count toward the Distinction in Writing program. The program is an exceptional option for students who want to pursue writing excellence beyond the classroom at GVSU.

The Distinction in Writing program is an optional program open to all writing majors that takes about two years to complete. Students work closely with their advisor to complete and keep track of activities that fulfill four out of five different components: Writing as a Professional, Writing for Publication or Performance, Writing in Off-Campus Communities, Writing Across Cultures, and Writing Among Disciplines. For each selected component, students must complete one Level A activity or two different Level B activities. At the end of the program, students assemble a portfolio, including a résumé, artifacts, and narrative, to

demonstrate successful engagement with the activities. Upon completion, students will receive a cord to wear at graduation and their names added to the plaque in the Writing Department.

Associate Professor and Unit Head Christopher Toth provides insight into the program and what it can offer to students. Toth wishes that more students would complete the program because it is beneficial in so many ways, like making students more thoughtful about their writing. He frames the Distinction in Writing program as a transition between the classroom and the workplace. “I think that the biggest benefit is that students get more writing experiences than they would if they just took their courses...they're having additional writing experience, which I think will make them stronger, better writers and also more marketable when they go on the job market,” Toth said.

In addition to gaining writing experience, students have the opportunity to work with an advisor one-on-one in a much more personal setting than the classroom. Toth encourages anyone considering the

program to reach out to their faculty advisor.

D. Cole Eichelberger is an alumni writing major who completed the Distinction in Writing program in 2017. Eichelberger decided to pursue the Distinction in Writing program with a friend, and his interests and writing experiences were already aligned with the program. His projects included writing and collaborating to produce a play, winning the Writing Department AWP Intro Awards Contest, working for the Fred Meijer Center for Writing and Michigan Authors, and participating in Model Arab League. Eichelberger combined his interests, such as Middle Eastern Studies and writing plays, with the Distinction in Writing program's requirements. “It's cool to see how you can pair that [writing] with other areas of academia and just other areas of interest,” Eichelberger said.

He also reflected on the relationship with his advisor, Associate Professor Oindrilla Mukherjee. He appreciated that she kept him on track and meeting deadlines while also taking a “hands-off” approach. He is currently pursuing an MFA from the University of Arkansas and continues to write fiction. “It's a good reminder of what you're actually capable of...It has been a nice reminder to me to make sure that I get back into academia, and also, get back into teaching,” Eichelberger said.

Students interested in the Distinction in Writing program can find more information at <https://www.gvsu.edu/writing/distinction-in-writing-4.htm> or stop by the Writing Department office (LOH 326) to pick up a booklet of information. Interested students should also contact their faculty advisor to discuss the program.



## PALMER AWARD

*Continued from page 1*

it. “What’s important here,” Palmer describes, “is that when they leave the class and they’re done with the project, they have a better understanding of the importance of website accessibility and accessibility in general, and also a better understanding of how it’s done in other countries.”

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*“[Palmer hopes that these programs and projects will] diversify our students’ perspectives so that they have a more complete view of the world.”*

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The ABC gives the “Distinction in the Practice of Diversity and Inclusion Award” to those whose work creates partnerships that produce a positive social change. The work Palmer and Oswal do with their students accomplished this by establishing that people with disabilities should have the same opportunities as everyone else. People who are blind use screen readers, which are software applications, like text-to-speech or Braille devices to be able to read websites. Screen readers help convey what people with typical eyesight or hearing can see/hear, but most times, as Palmer explains, they “only work on websites that are created in a way that provides enough information for the screen reader.” For example, if an image is included in a website, the screen reader cannot describe the image without having alternate text coded into that website. Palmer and Oswal help their students learn about these problems, and how they can

improve websites to make them more accessible.

Palmer participates in online collaboration projects such as this with her classes, which currently include WRT 351: Writing for the Web and WRT 354: Writing in the Global Context. These virtual exchange programs connect students in her classes with students from other countries, giving them the chance to experience cross-cultural knowledge and opinions without having to study abroad. Palmer hopes that these programs and projects will “diversify our students’ perspectives so they have a more complete view of the world.”

While she has already received the award, Palmer is still doing research on this topic. She has looked more into participatory design and participatory research, and how designers can create products that are more inclusive. Currently, Palmer is working with Oswal to interview website designers and user-experience professionals about their accessibility practices. Some questions Palmer asks to get a better understanding of these professionals’ work process in order for the field to be informed about these practices and design more accessible products are, “What exactly do they do to ensure that their websites are accessible? What kind of resources do they use? Where does accessibility enter into their design process?”

The ABC recognized Palmer and Oswal for their collaborative work in October at the annual conference, and they will present the research that earned them the “Diversity and Inclusion Award” next year at the ABC 87th Annual International Conference.

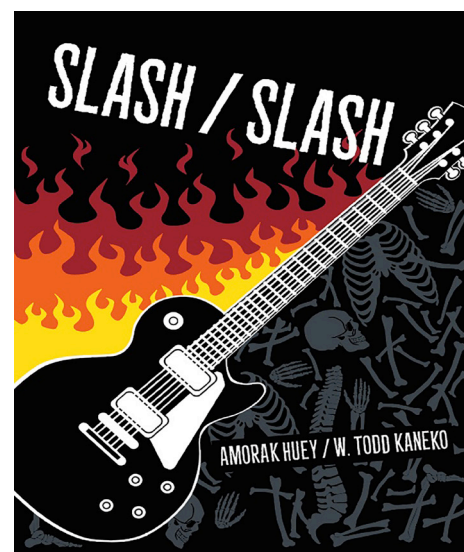
## FACULTY WRITERS

*Continued from page 5*

at GVSU. They also collaborated on a textbook together while developing their initial idea and this gave them a starting platform to see how they work as a team. When talking about their collaborative efforts, Kaneko commented, “it was thrilling to see what Huey turned those poems into.” Huey had equal trust for his writing partner and stated, “[Collaboration] taught us to let go of ‘this is my poem’ or ‘your poem.’ These are our poems.”

Professor Huey and Professor Kaneko’s work is a great example of how teamwork can create amazing pieces of writing when that teammate is someone you know you can build trust and mutual respect for, in regards to their writing.

If you have an idea for a writing project, what are you waiting for? If you have the inspiration to start a project, try finding even a bit of time for that creativity and let yourself have the freedom to edit and rewrite. Giving yourself that freedom and living in the mess will allow yourself to grow as a writer and continue creating amazing work.



*Amorak Huey and W. Todd Kaneko's Book  
(photo W. Todd Kaneko)*

Are you interested  
in: writing articles,  
copyediting, taking  
photos?

Attend our next interest  
meeting!

See our website for  
details:

<https://www.gvsu.edu/writing/inwriting-newsletter-14.htm>

## COVID-19 NOW

*Continued from page 7*

experience. Not only in terms of virtual versus in-person, but students still have some hesitancy sitting next to their consultant as comfort levels with the pandemic are different for students and writing consultants. However, students and consultants appreciate the in-person Writing Center experience, especially because a lot of their topics vary based on personal interests and their classes.

Overall, the experiences between faculty and students varied greatly in a shared experience. While this might not be “over,” there are lasting remnants of how it affects everyone. Between social distancing and curriculum modifications, Writing Center consultants and Writing Department faculty had to keep up with countless changes over the past year and a half to keep everyone safe

and maintain a quality experience in the classroom and in the Writing Center. The changes that have taken place are not only influencing other areas important to everyone, but also creating a culture involving more collaboration within the writing process.

## PFAS

*Continued from page 9*

illustrating the importance of her project.

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*“No story is too small.”*

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“Living with PFAS” is an ongoing project and will be available in GVSU Special Collections and University Archives in Winter 2022. If you are interested in learning more about the project or would like to contribute with an experience of how PFAS has affected you or someone you know, visit the project website: <https://www.pfasstories.org/>.

Just as DeVasto says, “No story is too small” and her work reminds us that our personal stories have importance in the world too.

## WRITING INTERN

*Continued from page 12*

writer,” said Keyes. “Start early when looking for an internship. Try to get any experience that you can. Try to know as many people as you can. Be confident and go for it!”

Keyes credits her writing internship for giving her an extra perspective into the world of writing. She also said it was a monumental way to connect the pieces of the abundance of skills she learned from the Writing Program to the reality of working in the business world.

## INWRITING

Fall 2021

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