

In Writing

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*Matthew Olzmann and Vievee Francis.
(photo: Todd Kaneko)*

A Lifetime of Poetry

Abby Schnell

When it comes to writing, the real stories are the ones we live through. Vievee Francis and Matthew Olzmann have certainly lived, both in their marriage and through poetry. The Robert C. Pew campus at GVSU was the proud host of these two poets on February 27. Their presence marked the fourth of six events in the GVSU Writer's Series, a year-long collection of talented authors brought to campus to hold a craft talk and reading with students. With humor and grace, the two authors enlightened the campus on their writing and personal history. Although they write with different styles, both found success in their ability to find poetry in everyday life.

In their early lives, neither Francis nor Olzmann were drawn to poetry. As Vievee Francis said during the craft talk, "[Poetry] happens to you." Francis said she didn't truly consider herself a poet until she was twenty-one,

partly due to unsupportive instructors in college. Her inspiration came from the poem "Child Beater" by Ai. This poem, to her, did a fair job of representing both the beaten child and the child beater herself. As Francis' career progressed, she thrived in similar stories of truth that touched readers. She explained, "Once I read Child Beater, I knew I was going to write poetry." Likewise, Olzmann found poetry in college. After Olzmann learned to appreciate poems, he began seeing them everywhere. "Poems are a way to explain really complicated stuff that was happening in the world around me... in a compressed manner."

Later in the evening, wrapped in the dark green walls of the Devos Center,

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Successful Alumnus: Dale Johnson

Teresa Williams

Every morning, Dale Johnson walks into the Williams Group office in downtown Grand Rapids, sets his bag on his side table, and unpacks his computer. After situating himself, he makes a bowl of oatmeal, and begins his day as a writer for the strategic communications firm.

In May 2012, after graduating from GVSU, Johnson began as an intern with Williams Group, a consulting agency that works with both corporate and philanthropic clients to help plan communications strategies and develop materials to bring their stories to life.

“Leading up to graduation, I was figuring out what to do next,” Johnson said. “I heard that Williams Group had an internship program to expose students and recent graduates to the communications field. Even with a background in writing, I honestly didn’t know much about ‘communications’ as a broader industry, or what it meant to work in an agency!”

Even with little understanding of the broader industry, his internship was a success. After only six months, Johnson was hired as a full associate. Now, in addition to writing materials like websites, brochures, and research reports, he is also a project



*Dale Johnson.
(photo: Williams Group)*

“There’s a sweet spot where professional writing and creative writing meet: knowing you need to convey information, but also keep a reader engaged.”

coordinator. This means on certain projects, he not only writes the content, but directly leads communication with clients and ensures everyone involved is on the same page.

“An average day includes me jumping between clients as I collaborate with other writers, designers, and project managers to complete assignments,” Johnson explained. “It involves conversation, coordination and flexibility, and it’s so rewarding.”

The year Johnson graduated was right

after the shift in curriculum that current writing majors today participate in. Majors previously had to select which track of courses they wanted to pursue: creative or professional. Johnson pursued the professional writing track, but still considers creative writing an important part of what he does.

“There’s a sweet spot,” he explained, “where professional writing and creative writing meet: knowing you need to convey information, but also keep a reader engaged along the way.”

Johnson did his best to immerse himself in a variety of ways to write while at GVSU. This exposure to a host of writing has aided him in developing his abilities. “I like to think of skills and knowledge in

terms of adding to my ‘toolbox,’ and I’m always looking for new techniques, sources, or experiences I can draw on when I’m working on a project.”

Johnson advises current students to “Be curious. Even if it’s a topic you aren’t familiar with, find an aspect of it that piques your interest and star there. Readers can tell when you care about something.” As for approaching a career in writing, Johnson explained, “Don’t feel limited to exploring a single industry. If you see words on or in something— someone wrote them. Writing is a foundation, and you can build on it and complement it with other skills to shape the direction you want to go.”

Writing Classes Prepare Student for Communicating Across Cultures

Jennifer Polasek

How did studying abroad influence this GVSU writing student's perspective of cross-cultural communication? By broadening her perspective of rhetoric. Last semester, I faced many challenges of cross-cultural communication while studying at Jagiellonian University and volunteering at the U.S. Consulate in Krakow, Poland. As a GVSU writing student, I credit most of the success I had abroad to the courses I took within my major.

Prior to going abroad, I had taken courses in Consulting with Writers and Writing in the Global Context: Culture, Technology, & Language Practices. The skills I acquired in both of these courses became extremely valuable when trying to communicate around a language barrier. Most of the classes I took at Jagiellonian University were taught by Polish professors who translated the coursework into English. Even though English was my native language, I



*Jennifer Polasek abroad in Poland.
(photo: Jennifer Polasek)*

still faced difficulties.

One course in particular, called Polish Gay Literature, consisted of analyzing various translated excerpts from books written by prominent Polish authors who were either gay or wrote about homosexuality. I was excited to take this course because I thought it would be interesting to see how this topic had evolved in a country that is heavily influenced by religion. The challenge became how to overcome poorly translated work that destroyed the stylistic qualities of the writing. Our professor wanted us to understand the context of the writing compared to its content. However, since this course was supposed to be about analyzing writing from a literary perspective, I felt inclined to decipher how much the rhetoric of these pieces was affected by the translations. I ended up having many conversations

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One Reflection on the AWP Conference: Looking at the Notebook Half Full

Gracey Mussina

Prior to attending *The Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Conference*, I found myself looking at my notebook as half empty. While the pages contained short stories and ideas, scattered thoughts and scribbles, I was unsure of where these words could go beyond their pages—where my education would go beyond the undergraduate level.

As emerging writers, sometimes we find ourselves at a loss for words or aspirations when thinking of our future professions. The *AWP Conference* revitalizes these notions with four days of insightful dialogue and features over 2,000 presenters; 500 readings, panels, and craft discussions; and a book fair hosting over 800 publishers, presses, and authors from around the world. One of the most remarkable things about

the AWP Conference is the location, which took place this year in Washington, DC during February 8-11.

For a first time experience, it can be a bit overwhelming taking in the various sights, surroundings, and resources the conference has to offer. This place and experience is similar to a beehive—everywhere you look there are trajectories of bodies swarming from panel discussions, to readings, to the book fair. Everyone is buzzing around, navigating their ways through the labyrinth of the conference center, scribbling in their journals, or doing a little bit of everything at once. “Seemingly every corner had a Roxane Gay, a Maggie Smith, a Sarah Kay,” says Annie Livingston, a junior writing student, reflecting on her first *AWP Conference*. “The conference expanded my idea of what

a career in writing could look like and stretched my heart as well,” Livingston says, “I think of truly great writing as an exercise of empathy and *AWP* forced me into a state of constant empathizing in the best way possible.”

Both emerging and established authors offer empowering dialogue, new perspectives, and introduce new works to attendees. I found many of the panels to revitalize creative energies, to catalyze a change in the future, and to consider new perspectives.

One of these was “The LastWord on Animals: Environmental Upheaval,” which featured a former editor of *Orion Magazine*, Jennifer Sahn; co-founder of the Association for the Study of Literature and the

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“Every Place is Inexhaustible,” says Rebecca Solnit at Fall Arts Celebration

Annie Livingston

On November 14, 2016, acclaimed writer Rebecca Solnit spoke at GVSU. An act of coming together and learning together, this event struck a particular interdisciplinary chord. One that seemed to resonate with the captivated packed room. Presenting a lecture as part of the Fall Arts Celebration in the Eberhard Center, Solnit said, “I love words; writing will always be a wonder, but there’s a way you can write your own life into a map.” Using this as a bridge between the written word and a larger framework, she asked everyone to really consider their place in time and history. She said, “Everything, and everyone, in a city is in dialogue with everything else.” By bringing her own knowledge of chemistry, history, geography, and above all, humanity, Solnit made every moment, map, and anecdote feel deeply personal.

She seemed to remind a room full of people of their capacity for empathetic curiosity, by inviting them to witness her own undying inquisitive nature. It was the kind of lesson that stretches the mind wider than any canvas. But this philosophically massive quality to her thinking should not have come as a surprise to anyone familiar with her writing or social engagements.

Solnit’s work is many things and, in many ways, escapes a simple definition. She is a historian, an activist, an essayist, and a map-maker. She has published writing on politics, art, place, and the environment. Her books include *The Faraway Nearby* (2013), *Men Explain Things To Me* (2014), *Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas* (2016) and she is credited with the concept behind the term “mansplaining,” though she did not invent the portmanteau herself. Some might look at these acts of creation as separated by field, but Solnit connected her sprawling works as a means of self-discovery and self-location. She said, “There’s always a question, I think, for all of us, do we really know who and where we are?” Some might pause after such a sweeping inquiry, but Solnit is not afraid of the big questions. She did not waver, and answered her own thoughts with, “To know where

we are is important in knowing who we are.”

In discussing her first atlas “Infinite City,” a map of San Francisco, Solnit was quick to clarify that this city is not the only limitless one. She says that because “the ways you can imagine a city, the versions of it that exist are...effectively infinite,” that San Francisco is not particular in its massive possibilities. Rather, all places are as expansive, once they are fully engaged

“I love words; writing will always be a wonder, but there’s a way you can write your own life into a map.”

with. Solnit waxed poetic about maps and the nature of geography, saying that, “each of us carries our own maps with us— each of you probably know where your mother’s house in relation to where you live, we have little maps in our heads of the places we go to all the time, there’s kind of a negative map of the places you’ve never been, and most of us have never been to a lot of the places we’ve lived in.” In this

way, Solnit made everyone’s worlds larger. She gave a captivated audience permission to explore.

This fall, some students were already exploring like this within their classrooms. In Beth Peterson’s writing course, Art of Activism, students were able to look at their writing in a “big-picture” sense, a luxury that is not always afforded to us. This class gave students the opportunity to think like Solnit does in her work. One student of this course, Gracey Mussina, explained further how Solnit broadened her perspectives. Mussina said, “Rebecca Solnit brought up how we can make invisible forces visible by extending beyond ourselves and our abilities by taking part in the things we aren’t good at. These words are revitalizing to my work as a writer, and my studies...” These moments of revitalization and fresh inspiration are crucial for anyone in any discipline. The Writing Department knows this, and is conscious of creating classes and events that will inspire students to keep looking, learning, and asking questions. Mussina added that “after attending her event, I have faith that through our knowledge and unique capabilities as individuals, we can create a powerful change in our community together.”



*Rebecca Solnit speaks at the Fall Arts Celebration
(photo: Todd Kaneko)*

Assistant Professor Huey's Big Year

EJ Fowler

Assistant Professor Amorak Huey's poem poses a question: "Sun sets over this river city: the transient slap & echo of blues. Water makes the best witness. If you never stand still, there's nowhere you can't end up. Why not Memphis?" This excerpt comes from his award winning poem "Memphis," which was part of the collection that contributed to his earning the National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship for 2017.

Every year, the NEA grants an individual \$25,000 for their excellence in poetry or prose. This money can go towards time for writing, research, travel, and the like. The award alternates between prose and poetry every year, and 2017 was the year for poetry. Huey received the call back in November to announce his win. It was odd timing, and he did not even answer the first call, believing it to be from a politician about the November election. However, when they called again, he answered. Huey's surprise quickly turned to excitement as he realized what had happened:

"They don't call to tell you no. I've been told no plenty of times, and they don't call to say no... It's such an affirmation of my work, and that feels good." This isn't the first time Huey has applied for the grant.

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He applied at least three times previous, each with a different strategy for building his portfolio: "Always before, I would try to sort of psych out... how to make the best packet." Funnily enough, this was the year Huey didn't have as much time to prepare his application. He turned it in close to the deadline and built his portfolio more based on which pieces he was the proudest of and felt the most representational of him rather



Assistant Professor Amorak Huey
(photo: Rachel Kishman)

than what would cater to a judge's tastes.

Those who know Huey here at Grand Valley are familiar with his love of poetry as well as his past accomplishments. Along with pieces published in various poetry collections, he has three chapbooks in circulation. The first, *The Insomniac Circus*, uses a collection of poems to immerse the reader in a fictional circus, following performer after performer to solidify his world. His second chapbook, *Ha Ha Thump*, has less of an obvious connection from poem to poem, but all tie loosely together in themes of love. His third and most recent, *A Map of the Farm from the End of Happy Hollow Road*, is heavily focused on a farm in Alabama where he grew up. One of his most prized accomplishments is his poem "Memphis," which was featured in *The Best American Poetry 2012*. He is currently looking for publishers for two manuscripts, titled *Boombox* and *Seducing the Asparagus Queen*.

While there isn't a direct connection or underlying theme that connects each of his chapbooks, Huey feels that his most recent collection shares much with his unpublished collection *Boombox*, both tying in themes and experiences from his childhood in Alabama. However, a poet's bibliography

doesn't have to all thematically connect. In fact, it can speak to a poet's range, and their ability to call on a variety of experiences.

Huey's love of his craft bleeds onto the page with every piece he writes. As a poet and a professor, he is in tune with the experiences of readers. While he understands that his work will never be interpreted by two readers the exact same way, he draws on his experiences reading poems to explain how he wants readers to engage with his work:

"I like the experience that I've been sort of transported somewhere for a few minutes, and seeing the world through someone else's eyes... not just their eyes, but their language... and I get to sort of inhabit that for the time that I'm in the poem. I hope people would do that with my work... You write work, you send it out in the world, and you won't really know how people will react to it. But that's my hope: the poems make a space for the reader to sit with them and experience the world for a few minutes."

It is a proud moment for GVSU, as well as the Writing Department specifically, to have a beloved faculty awarded for his work and his passion. Huey's poetry calls on specific memories yet resonates with a variety of audiences. Even if a portion of the audience doesn't understand the references made in his poem "Memphis," everyone, at some level, can connect with the line, "None of us ever fall where we belong – we are ghosts on our way to someplace else."

**Writing Major
Scholarship
Awards:**

Rebekah Glupker

Riley Collins

A Night to Honor Some of GVSU's Best

Emily Zerrenner

Students, their family members, and faculty were scattered around the room, amongst tan tables surrounded by dark blue chairs. The podium and its microphone stood at the front, a symbol of the impending readings to come. A low hum of excited conversation buzzed through the audience as programs were handed out with the list of GVSU writers and their outstanding work. This was the *AWP* Student Reading.

This annual reading is put on by the Student Reading Series (SRS), and the event aims to honor those whose work won the *National Association of Writers and Writers' Programs* (AWP) Intro Awards. This is a contest through the Writing Department to determine the pieces sent on to the countrywide writing competition. Its goal is to discover exceptional works by students enrolled in *AWP* member programs; therefore, winning the awards at GVSU means that those writers will represent the university's best.

Once the SRS co-directors quieted the buzzing room, the event began with the two

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honorable mentions in nonfiction. Matthew Bain was first with a sweet but ruthlessly scientific piece, taking the audience along on a bug-hunting journey with his daughter. Zach Sheneman's excerpt had a more humorous edge to it, earning a laugh from the room with the story of his grandfather's

choice in beers. Finally, Chelsea Billing's winning piece "Stereocilia" had a touching, silencing effect on the audience. "This piece sprang into my mind half-formed," Billings said about her process, "and I just had to type it out to see what it would grow into. Honestly, I was a little panicked when I

“I got up from where I was sitting in the library and danced around by the Argo tea shop,” said Livingston, “I’ll always remember it as a time of incredible validation as a poet and a writer.”

found out I won – I had submitted to the non-fiction category on a whim.” Her piece grappled with the complexities of being pregnant and the terrifying moment the ultrasound could not pick up her baby's heartbeat. The split second of delay in the applause spoke to the effect Billing's writing had on the audience.

Alissa Rabideau read next with her winning work for fiction, "Take Me With You". Rabideau says she was inspired by her own life at the time. "When I wrote this piece, my whole life was feeling a little wobbly... I want to sort of explore that place of indecision and uncertainty for your future and what would happen if you just kind of let life take you away." Her story follows a main character that let life take her where it wanted; the audience wobbled along with Rabideau as she read.

Finally, the poetry readers finished the night. The three winners were Maria McKee, Paige Leland, and Annie Livingston. Chelsea Billings also read one more time for her honorable mention poem. McKee said that she titled her poem, "The End Road Work Sign Reminded Me that Most Things Cease to Exist" before writing it. "I went to a Writers Under 30 workshop to finish it,"

McKee explains, "I was with a friend when I found out that I had won, and we shared a special moment together. I was so happy and surprised. I thought I wouldn't win."

Livingston also felt a similar happiness when she discovered she would represent GVSU in the national competition. "I got up from where I was sitting in the library and danced around by the Argo tea shop," she said. "I'll always remember it as a time of incredible validation as a poet and a writer."

As the formality dissolved with parting words from the co-directors of SRS, congratulations and praise for the outstanding writers were abundant, as attendees lingered to talk about the pieces they had just heard. Ashlyn N. Rowell, a co-director of SRS said, "The *AWP* reading is one of my favorite readings SRS puts on. It's an opportunity for the writing community here at GVSU to celebrate students who have been recognized at a national level."

AWP Intro Award Winners in Poetry

*Maria McKee
for "The End Road Work
Sign Reminded Me
that Most Things
Cease to Exist"*

*Paige Leland
for "When I Was Little
I Punched My Brother
and Called It a Love Tap"*

It Can Be Pretty Major to Minor

Laura Thaxton

When I tell others that I am a writing minor, and not a major, they seem shocked. “But, you do so much for the Writing Department!, and you’re always going to all of these poetry and author events!” they might say. Then they add, “Well, why aren’t you a writing major?” The answers that I typically give revolve around the fact that I am, indeed, still a writing student above all. For some, it is a strange idea that one can balance two areas of study without one taking the predominant real estate allotted for one’s passions. Sure, we minors might not be as “intensely” studying writing as if it were our major, but we are able to mold our experience to be incredibly fruitful.

To earn a minor in writing, students complete six classes in total. This includes some required foundational courses, and then students are allowed to choose electives, such as: Writing for the Web, Fiction Workshops and other genre workshops, Business Communication, and even Multi-modal Composing. Minor students have the ability to curate their writing courses to what might benefit them the most, without the larger commitment of a major. Whether this is creative poetry classes, or even magazine writing, writing students of *all* kinds are exposed to comprehensive skills that will carry over into their other areas of study.

Something that the writing minor specifically excels at is increasing one’s professional abilities for careers that are typically seen as not being writing-intensive on the surface level. Majors such as public relations, nursing, and even business all state “writing

abilities” in their job descriptions. Not only does one learn how to strengthen one’s writing process for higher quality work, but one also learns how this process applies to their major areas of study.

For example, psychology major Brooke Burns has her eyes set on becoming an occupational therapist. She thought about

“Not only does my minor brighten up a resume, but I also get a litany of communicative skills to boot, and pieces of writing for a portfolio that could make me stand out from other candidates in a job interview.”

the idea of having a writing minor when she experienced her first job shadow. “I realized that half the time that you worked [with] patients,” said Burns, “nearly the exact [same] amount of time was used to write up reports of what happened.” This was something she did not expect to find in her future career. “The reports have to be perfect and exact... I thought a writing minor would be a great pairing to learn how to do it well.” In the future, Burns plans on taking the Professional Writing course and even

the Writing with Style course to help fulfill some of her minor requirements and help her professionally.

Senior Steven Karbownik, another fellow writing minor, also sees value in his minor—even as a statistics major. “I always knew I enjoyed writing,” Karbownik said, “and I figure to at least get a minor would help me become more well-rounded as far as communications.” He also pointed out that credit-wise, the minor was fairly easy to fit into his schedule. But, when asked if the minor complemented his major, Karbownik stated, “In stats, you write a lot of reports. You have to communicate all kinds of information effectively.” However, he has also taken advantage of classes like Intermediate Nonfiction and poetry, where he otherwise would not get the opportunity to do creative writing as well. “This experience of honing that craft really has benefited me in my major.”

I have found that I share the exact common ground with these other minors. Not only does my minor brighten up a resume, but I also get a litany of communicative skills to boot, and pieces of writing for a portfolio that could make me stand out from other candidates in a job interview.

So even though the writing major is not for everyone, think about how writing is incorporated into so many other areas of study. Chances are you’ll be writing more than you thought you would be, and let’s be honest, it can really be pretty major to be a writing minor.

Writing Department Student Awards

Writing Department Outstanding Student: Sarah Smith

Venderbush Leadership Award Nominee: Sarah Cauzillo

Niemeyer Award Nominee: Anna Bouwkamp

Jurries Family Scholarship: Mariah Otlewski

Preserving Place: Thoughts from Two GVSU Writing Professors

Ashley Benedict

If I'm writing about a place closer to home, then I draw from my own memories," Associate Professor Caitlin Horrocks said, and the audience nodded in appreciation, jotting down in their notebooks eagerly. This was an answer to the question asked that often haunts writers: *what is place? How do we write about place?* On Tuesday, January 31 from 6-8 P.M., Assistant Professor Amarak Huey and Associate Professor Caitlin Horrocks hosted a craft talk and reading in Cook-DeWitt Center that allowed writers to explore the importance of answering these questions on place and think about the ways writers can incorporate experiences into the places created.

Before each professor began their reading, their students introduced them with a collection of heartfelt words. Maria McKee introduced Huey, and spoke about the impact he has had on her decision to pursue poetry. "As a person who has given me more encouragement than I probably deserve, Huey is not only an intelligent and vigorous educator, but an unyielding and steadfast

human being."

Kathryn Davis introduced Horrocks, and admitted that before being her student, she had been a huge fan of Horrocks' work. "They say you should be disappointed anytime you meet a writer whose work you love, and I suppose that's because you should never expect a person to embody every brilliant thing that's crossed their mind—but the actual, physical Caitlin Horrocks comes close." From the sidelines, both professors wore smiles—proud and touched by their students' introductions.

Huey walked onto stage first, making sure to give McKee a hug before reading one of his most recent publications, "A Map of the Farm Three Miles from the End of Happy Hollow Road." The collection of poems centers on Alabama and Michigan, two places that Huey considers home. "It seems so important that I get this right—" begins one of his poems, sweeping the audience into his childhood on a small farm in the heart of Alabama, compiling details until all were following the map he laid out, delving

deeper and deeper into the personal recollections of his life connected to each place.

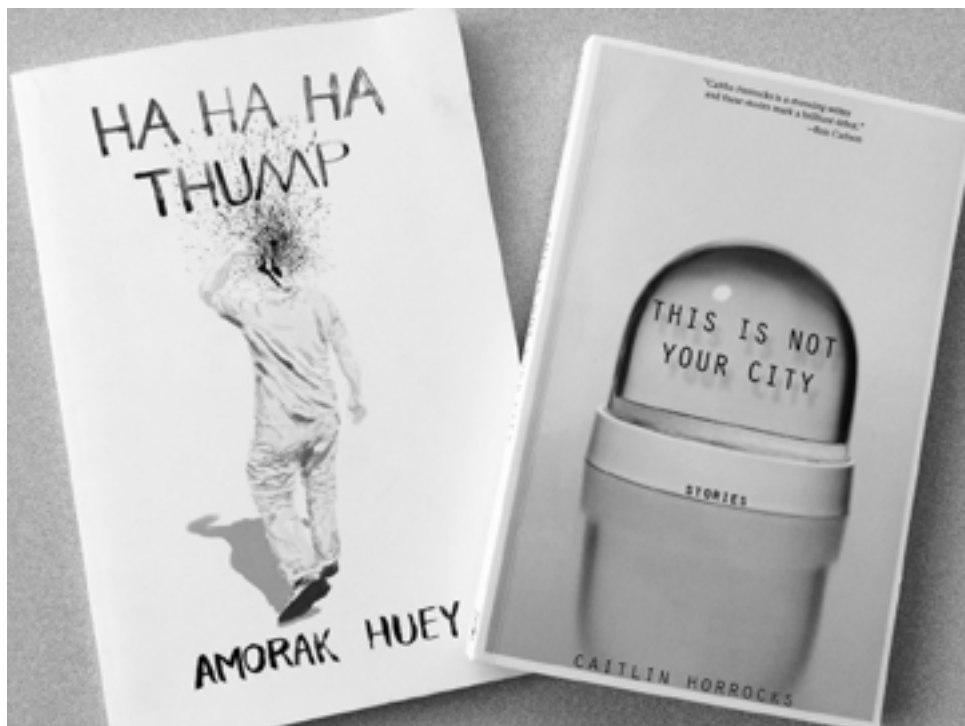
Horrocks walked on stage later with an exuberant smile, creating an entirely new atmosphere as she read one of her essays entitled "Baseline." The audience listened with rapt attention as she wove baselines and coordinates and serial killers with her

"The reason you're writing about place is to preserve it the way it used to be."

own personal tale, slipping into accents and painting pictures with the help of her slideshow. Her memories of Arizona were brought to life, warming the crowd; her move to Michigan told of her transition into adulthood and the growth of her family.

Once the reading had finished, the audience was given time to ask questions. One student asked both Huey and Horrocks whether or not they had traveled back to these places in order to write about them, and Huey concluded the reading with words that left us all to think about place from a new perspective: "When you're writing about place you realize the place you're writing about doesn't exist anymore...the reason you're writing about the place is to preserve it the way it used to be."

Both professors performed in unique ways that transported us to these places. Arizona, Alabama, and Michigan all came to life through the rich recounting of their experiences. The audience was able to see how importance place really is—both in our writing and in our daily lives. Place is a tool and an experience. It is part of every story and every memory. In order to truly master the art of writing about place, writers must draw from their memories, preserving the places they have been as though they belong to them, because they do.



Ha Ha Ha Thump by Amarak Huey and This is Not your City by Caitlin Horrocks.

(photo: Todd Kaneko)

Author Bich Min Nguyen Shares About The Importance of Nonfiction

Lindsey Krawczak

On March 23, 2017, students gathered in the Russel H. Kirkhof Center to hear Bich Minh Nguyen's reading and discussion. Nguyen is the author of three books, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, *Short Girls*, and *Pioneer Girl*. Assistant Professor Todd Kaneko introduced Nguyen to the crowded room by calling her a writer, parent, and fierce political activist who moved to Grand Rapids in 1975. It was from her new project *Owner of a Lonely Heart*, that she read several selections, all of which revolved around her experiences of growing up in a Vietnamese immigrant family.

Nguyen explored the connections between music and memory in her first reading, "Refugee," named after Tom Petty's song. After taking in the confusion of the room, Nguyen ended up playing the song on her phone saying, "I know you're young, but just try!" In this selection, Nguyen explained that all of her early memories were intertwined



Bich Min Nguyen
(Photo: Bich Min Nguyen)

with the music her uncles would play, which became like a soundtrack to her childhood. It was when she started singing "Refugee" that she realized how the song paints an unflattering and offensive view of what it means to be a refugee like herself, and it would take her years to overcome the feeling of shame over her status.

The last piece she read was an op-ed about the musical "Miss Saigon." Nguyen explained how the play portrays Vietnamese characters in a reductionist and sexist way. It was from watching the musical in college that she learned about exoticism and cultural appropriation and how these work to perpetuate shame. Nguyen told students that as we see a surge of racism today, "we have to be our own proof of progress."

Throughout her readings, Nguyen encouraged students to take on nonfiction writing, saying that "even if fiction is your thing, you're going to need to write nonfic-

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Writing Center Conferences Offer Student Many Unique Opportunities

Maria McKee

The Writing Center Conferences offer student opportunities to educate and network

The Fred Meijer Center for Writing and Michigan Authors (FMCWMA) has a record of connecting their consultants with professional opportunities through writing center conferences. At conferences, students are invited to attend panel discussions and workshops, and even present on research they have done at their own writing centers. One student who has taken full advantage of these opportunities is writing major, Teresa Williams. Williams began their time at FMCWMA in 2014. Now in their final semester at GVSU, Williams is leaving having attended five writing center conferences and feeling more confident in their professional life post-graduation.

So far this academic year, Williams has presented at two conferences. This past October, they presented at the *Michigan Writing Center Association (MiWCA)* conference in Warren, Michigan. Their panel, "Mother Tongue: Perspectives on Linguistic Discrimination and Inclusion in the Writing Center," is central to the narrative of inclusivity at FMCWMA and the Writing Department. "Stripping students of their native language is harmful," Williams says. It is important to them that every student's native language and dialect of English is validated, that Standard Academic English does not hold value over other dialects.

Williams explained that this idea was reinforced by their writing classes, which have helped them understand how people feel about writing and language. While in

Intermediate Fiction Workshop, Williams said that they were exposed to a variety of pieces that did not conform to Standard Academic English. "This taught me that good writing doesn't have to be 'academic,'" they said. They have been able to spread this notion of linguistic inclusivity to the greater GVSU community through FMCWMA, and now to other Michigan universities through their presentation at *MiWCA*.

Williams did not stop there, however. This past November, they traveled to Tacoma, Washington to present at the *National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing*. Their panel, "If You Build it, They Will Come: Bringing Multimodality to the Writing

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the audience had the opportunity to hear the poets' work first-hand. The difference between the two poets was apparent, from the topic to overall style. Francis read about her fears from moving around the country, and Olzmann brightened the room with his letters to a whale. While Francis holds a rich sense of elegance in description and emotion, Olzmann's poems are more conversational. He writes about the stars, and she writes about home. The two even noted that Olzmann writes best at night, and Francis is a notorious early bird. Yet, their sense of harmony was obvious. Francis

“While Francis holds a rich sense of elegance in description and emotion, Olzmann’s poems are more conversational. He writes about the stars, and she writes about home.”

and Olzmann's personalities consistently complemented each other throughout the night. When asked about their early life together, both poets were free to interject or correct the other.

“He’s wrong,” Francis would interrupt, only to be met with an “It was nothing like that.” One author rarely answered the questions alone that were asked. Rather, the two would figure out the answer together. Despite the divergence, they have bonded over their writing. As Francis admitted, “I couldn’t have married anybody but a poet.”

The authors met at a poetry reading many years ago and have helped each other in their work ever since. Francis said Olzmann keeps her grounded in her writing, while Olzmann appreciates Francis’ insight. Although the two have already met poetry, they still see different sides of it every day. Francis and Olzmann continue to tackle poetry, both through their work and the story of their life.

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Environment, Michael Branch; and environmental essayist, Nick Neely who expressed their interactions with the human-nature relationship: “We have this tendency to look at the world the way we look at Medusa; sometimes when we look at problems as a whole, we turn to stone and don’t take action. To tackle each issue—whether it be social, environmental, political, or economic—we need to devise new solutions.” The panelists suggest that sometimes it may feel that we know nothing, however, we have the opportunity to know everything by working together toward a greater common knowledge.

The *AWP* conference creates an understanding of what possibilities undergraduate writers can pursue post-graduation. Next year the *AWP* Conference will take place in Tampa from March 7-10, 2018. Funding is available from the GVSU Office of Undergraduate Research’s Academic and Professional Enrichment Fund to help students who are interested in attending. Those interested in attending should speak with their professors to determine funding opportunities for the trip.

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with the professor about how the rhetorical situation of a book changes based on the language it’s presented in.

In the majority of my classes abroad, I was one of only a handful of students whose native language was English. One of the main challenges of other international students was being able to communicate effectively in English. I began helping a couple students in different courses revise essays for our final exams, challenging my communication skills, and I ended up bonding with these students over the fact that we were all facing challenges of communicating in different ways.

Being part of GVSU’s writing program gave me a great foundation to face my challenges of cross-cultural communication head on while abroad. Studying abroad is a great option for writing students because it allows you to put your skills into use.



Abby Klomparens, Jackie Vega, Gracey Mussina, Kathryn Davis, Teresa Williams, Sam Stebbins, and Annie Livingston at the AWP Conference in Washington D.C. (photo: Beth Peterson)

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Center,” focused on how to bring multimodal writers to the writing center. This presentation was inspired by two writing courses, Multimodal Composing and Consulting with Writers. For a project in Multimodal Composing, Williams created a video that attempted to reach out to students and encourage them to spend time at FMCWMA. This sparked Williams’ interest in multimodal writers and creators at GVSU, and how FMWMA could promote their services to all kinds of creators. “We are trained communicators,” Williams says. “Even if we haven’t been trained in a specific genre, we can tell what’s good, what’s working, what isn’t working.”

Beyond the benefits these presentations have had for FMCWMA and the GVSU

“I get to meet other writers and understand their ways of thinking. I’ve been able to network with writers and writing programs.”

community, Williams has also benefitted from their hard work presenting writing center research. “I get to meet other writers and understand their ways of thinking. I’ve been able to network with writers and writing programs,” Williams says of their experiences. They have even presented in front of the writing center at Michigan State University, where they one day hope to be a graduate assistant and be a part of the Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing program.

Although students from any major are able to become writing consultants, writing majors notice direct association between what they do in class and what they want to do post-graduation. “As a writing major, you already have some foundational skills for talking about writing. And being a consultant helps you become better at giving feedback,” Williams says, encouraging writing students to consider the opportunity. “Conferences provide you the opportunity to go talk about writing with others across the state, region, or country.” Through these

conferences, Williams has cultivated professional experience that has prepared them for graduation. Their dedication to the writing major and FMCWMA is evident through their impressive record of presentations and research, and Williams will carry these experiences with them post-graduation into their professional life.

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tion, and it’s a great way to let your ideas develop”. When asked what the hardest step of writing is for her, Nguyen answered that it is beginning. She advised writers that although it may be painful, to turn off the internet and phones, and free write to get over the fear and difficulty of beginning a story.

The discussion ended with a question of how Nguyen makes writing about the Asian American experience inclusive. After a pause, Nguyen insisted that the Asian American experience is not exclusive and said, “We need to diversify our point of view by not thinking about experiences as ‘other.’ To think experiences are unique to one person is being overly exclusive”. Nguyen’s reading was riddled with references to music and memory, and an insistence that we all need to try writing nonfiction. It is through writing nonfiction that we can share personal experiences, only to find out that they are relatable to those around us.

Winter 2017**Editor**

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Meet the New Department Chair, Associate Professor Christopher Toth

Sarah Cauzillo

Associate Professor Christopher Toth has just completed his first academic year as the new Chair of the Writing Department. Toth's passion for education began as an undergraduate writer himself. As an English and creative nonfiction student at Hiram College, he worked at a writing center on his campus similar to GVSU's Writing Center. In this role, he worked as an undergraduate teaching assistant in first year writing courses. He found it to be a very natural and organic fit: "I liked to talk about writing and I loved helping students become better writers."

"Putting the students first [is most important], making sure they have a full and well-rounded experience."

His passions took him to Iowa State University for his Masters in Creative Nonfiction and his Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Professional Communication. It was here during his Masters and Ph.D. studies that he found his self-proclaimed "dual identity" in both professional communication and creative writing. Therefore, GVSU, with their dynamic curriculum of professional and creative writing, became the perfect fit.

Toth was drawn to GVSU's Writing Department, first, because few universities have a writing program separate from English. But also, because the simultaneous and unique focuses in both professional communication and creative writing that GVSU's Writing Department's curriculum had fit so well with his dual identity as a writer.

Toth's love for the GVSU Writing Department extends beyond just the curriculum. The "amazing faculty, the dedicated students, and the excellent [writing] student organizations that provide so many oppor-

tunities for students," are just a few more reasons for his passion. Interacting with students is one of his favorite parts of being a GVSU writing professor, and the students were his motivation for becoming Department Chair.

"As cheesy as [it] sounds," Toth says, "I really want to help make a difference ... to make things run smoother and set students up for success." While he admits that as the Department Chair, he was surprised at how little time he would have to dedicate to student interaction, in comparison to being solely a professor, he still describes his role as Department Chair as a servant to the students.

Most important to him is "always putting the students first ... Making sure they have a full and well-rounded experience... so that by the time they leave, they have a better sense of what they want to do; after being exposed to all writing careers, they can go out into the world ... and write in a variety of situations, for a variety of audiences, and for a variety of purposes."

While he may not be working full-time in the classroom to promote this vision right now, Toth is dedicated to working hard administratively to set writing students up for the best future possible after graduation. His plans include

"As cheesy as [it] sounds, I really want to help make a difference ... to make things run smoother and set students up for success."

launching new advising initiatives and establishing an alumni mentoring program that would connect current students with graduates. Toth also intends to lead the department in a revisit of the capstone course (WRT 495), a course that missed



*Associate Professor Christopher Toth
(photo: Todd Kaneko)*

full revision in the 2012 curriculum change. He hopes the department will be able to revise the course to more accurately culminate the new modular curriculum.

A noteworthy goal that Toth has already accomplished in his first year has been to alter the schedule of writing classes to better accommodate students. Because of his efforts, module courses will never overlap, allowing students more flexibility. And in addition, he has even assured that students will never have to forfeit an opportunity for a class due to travel time between the Allendale and downtown Pew campus.

Toth is excited, energized, and devoted to student success in all aspects of the Writing Department: from the curriculum, to advising opportunities, and even down to class scheduling needs. He has high hopes for his next few years as Writing Department Chair, and the Writing Department is proud and hopeful for him.