

# KSU English Department Newsletter

Fall 2024/Winter 2025

## THE ENGLISH BROADSIDE



**KENNESAW STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

NORMAN J. RADOW COLLEGE OF  
HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
*Department of English*

WHAT'S  
YOUR  
STORY?

# THE ENGLISH BROADSIDE

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Newsletter Interns: **Moki Murillo & Lawrence Adkins**

Editorial Team: **Gabrielle Punzalan, Jenny Rissen, & Gwen Samford**

Faculty Coordinator: **Dr. Erin Bahl**

# LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

**Dear faculty, students, and alumni,**

The 2024/2025 academic year has been another stellar year for the KSU English Department.

As I reflect on the year, several distinguishing themes emerge. One of the most hotly debated developments in English Studies has been the advent of generative artificial intelligence as a powerful writing tool. On the one hand, AI writing technologies present a major challenge to English faculty and students, as faculty have had to learn to navigate student misuse of these technologies when asked to manually produce written deliverables as a form of academic misconduct despite its being much harder to prove such misuse than was the case with previous forms of digitally based plagiarism. Faculty teaching literary studies have also been challenged to navigate student usage of AI to produce commentary on assigned reading rather than developing traditional critical reading skills through engagement with primary literary texts. This is to say nothing of broader concerns about the technology's impact, such as its drain on environmental resources. On the other hand, many faculty have advocated for our programs that train students to enter workforces in which employers have indicated a desire for graduates to possess the ability to use AI technologies to streamline their work,

that it is essential that faculty devise strategies for talking about ethical usage of AI and practicing such usage in their courses. A product of this strategy was the approval of a graduate certificate in AI and Writing Technologies and our search for a new assistant professor specializing in this area of writing studies. While this will be an ongoing discussion within our Department, as it is in the field of English Studies as a whole, I am proud to work alongside a group of faculty who are thoughtfully and directly engaging this important issue. Their reflections are expressed in a roundtable-style discussion that is a centerpiece of this issue.

Another important theme has been the success of Department faculty in the areas of research and creative activity. Our Department is a research-driven, student-centered community, in which informed teaching is motivated by practiced inquiry. Faculty achieved several notable accomplishments in research and creative activity this year. Three faculty, Keith Botelho, Cherif Diop, and Laura McGrath, were awarded competitive Tenured Faculty Enhancement Leaves. Garrard Conley's novel, *All the World Beside*, was published by Penguin Random House to widespread acclaim. Aaron Levy's play, *The Student Body*, was performed by the Destination Theater 3

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and featured by the Radow College of Humanities and Social Sciences as part of its mental health service theme for the current academic year. Jeanne Law's research on strategies for ethical writing with AI resulted in her receiving several invitations to deliver training and workshops around the country on the subject. Dominique McDaniel and Carlos Kelly won prestigious awards from their disciplinary associations for their work. These are only some of our faculty's accomplishments in this area over the past year, as we do our part to support President Schwaig's goal for KSU as a growing R2 institution to achieve national prominence for excellent research and creative activity.

A final notable accomplishment was our recognition as KSU's nominee for the University Systems of Georgia's High-Impact Practices and Experiential Learning Award. This nomination reflects well on our faculty's collective buy-in for high-impact educational practices through which we help students cultivate and articulate the value of their learning and skillsets while continuing to engage them in discussion of what is best in human expression. Several efforts led to this nomination. These include high levels of course-based adoptions of HIPs reported to the University that increased steadily over time. We also support several innovative in-house experiential learning initiatives, such as the Game Narrative Lab (directed by Victoria Lagrange). Our faculty and students

engage widely in education abroad and cultural exchange, including major ongoing programs exposing students to study in Mexico, Italy, and Morocco. Lastly, faculty have been involved in several competitive recognitions for HIPs-based work, such as Lara Smith-Sitton's contribution to Green Card Voices Atlanta to collect Atlanta-area immigrant narratives supported extensive undergraduate research, which was awarded a USG Community Service and Engagement Award for Outstanding Student Research or Creative Accomplishment Project; the Atlanta Student Movement Project, under the leadership of Jeanne Law, to produce digital histories of Atlanta Civil Rights elders and which was the recipient of a Rich Foundation Grant; and the Teagle Foundation Journeys in Justice Grant, to which Jeanne Law and Michael Keleher both contributed, to support community-engaged learning regarding Atlanta's Civil Rights history in area schools.

The Department continued such work with a major cultural exchange project in Fall 2024, supported by Nina Morgan, to host an international faculty fellow, Dr. Saad Boulahnane from Morocco, who conducted research and engaged faculty and students in several venues during his month-long visit.

I have been proud and gratified to work alongside English faculty and students on these projects over the course of the year. I am optimistic for another exciting year to come.

*John C. Howard*

# *THE STUDENT BODY* BY DR. AARON LEVY

Written by Moki Murillo &  
Gabrielle Punzalan

*The Student Body*, a new play by author and Kennesaw State University professor Aaron Levy, casts a light on teen mental health with a satirical approach that many young students can find relatable. In *The Student Body*, Levy writes sensationalized depictions of high school life with a humorous tone similar to early teen comedic satires, such as *Heathers* and *Easy A*. Directed by Megan Cramer and co-produced with Destination Theatre, *The Student Body* rounded off its big debut at the Chaddick Theatre @ The Galloway School after its run from August 9-16, showcasing the show's stellar performances from its well-rounded ensemble cast. The play was featured on NPR WABE City Lights with Lois Reitzes and in articles in KSU's The Headlight Review literary journal, KSU News Stories, and GCTE's Scribbles 'n Bits newsletter. Funded by RCHSS Seed and Project Development Grants, with additional support from a Literary Event Grant of Georgia (LEGG) grant, *The Student Body* has received recognition in several competitions, including Finalist for the Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC) Charles M. Getchell New Play Contest.

While the play has a lot of entertainment value, its story has much to say about the dilemmas that many teens face today. Rich with cunning social commentary, the playwright also has much to say about the world we live in, both in the story and without.

## **A Brief Recap**

Set in Krisp County High School, the main leads of *The Student Body* are Baily (John Lumapas), a 98-pound wrestler with a hero complex, and Amanda B. (Bekah Medford), a former cheerleader grappling with body dysmorphia and an eating disorder. The plot follows Baily's quest to "save" Amanda after she runs away from home. While Amanda and Baily's story features most prominently in this play, there is a supporting cast of characters who contribute their own high school struggles. There is the school's wrestling star, Dallas, who aims for a sports scholarship, but he faces challenges after developing feelings for a local dancer, Justin (Evan Philips), and questioning his sexuality as a result. Dallas' best friend and heavyweight wrestler, Houston (Chase Sumner) undergoes a gastric bypass due to health problems related to his weight, but this surgery causes him to drop out of wrestling and negatively affects his relationship with his girlfriend, who is also named Amanda (Daniela Santiago). Neglected by her congressman father, Baily's sister, Lisa, makes romantic advances toward the school's coach (Cory Phelps), which causes a major scandal that sees the coach take the fall for Lisa's mistake. As these events unfold, the school principal (also played by Daniela Santiago) implements misguided policies, such as banning mirrors and weight scales, which do nothing to help the struggles of the teenage ensemble.

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The story takes a turn for the worse when Houston undergoes illegal surgery to regain his former weight. Sadly, Houston dies from surgical complications. Thankfully, this event serves as a wake-up call for the rest of our characters. Baily helps Amanda confront her trauma, and he later finds support from his father (also played by Chase Sumner) to reverse the school's misguided policies. Dallas embraces his identity as a gay man through his growing love for dance and his relationship with Justin, and Lisa redeems herself by being honest about her seduction attempt, clearing the coach's name. The play concludes on a hopeful note as Baily returns to wrestling with a better outlook on life.

## Deeper Meanings Behind The Student Body

Aaron Levy has a message to say with *The Student Body*. Each of the journeys taken by the characters of the play tackles many social and mental health issues faced by teens and young people today, such as body image, anxiety, impacts of social media for teens, and whether well-meaning adults are doing more harm than good in the name of protecting the teens in their lives. The adults' neglect of the student characters throughout the play is a purposeful statement by Levy, a longtime educator who has kept in touch with the goings-on within the education community.

After viewing the play, we interviewed Aaron Levy about his play and what we could take from it. When issues similar to those depicted in his play showed themselves in real life, Levy noted that the response of the school authorities "might not have been the right thing to do." In our interview, Levy notes that many adults focus on solving the visible symptoms of teen problems, such as banning mirrors to discourage body image anxiety, rather than the core issue, such as the social pressures or neurological disorders that cause the anxiety. During his research for writing his play, Levy also notes that teens are becoming less social due partly to recent social developments, such as smartphones and parents wanting to shelter their kids from the outside world. As a result, many teens today don't know how to reach out to others for help.

In Levy's own words, "adults and teens need to consider each other when they're trying to come up with the best policies for what ails us." Adults need to listen to why the teens under their care are hurting, just as said teens need to reach for that help in the first place. This attitude can be seen in the play. Amanda B. only survived because Baily chose to reach out to the coach and called an ambulance. The school only reversed its misguided policies after the Congressman listened to his kids and finally took action.

While the play is smart in how it delivers its social commentary, Levy also knows the limits of his work. As a writer, he can make a funny and thought-provoking play that could start discussions about teen mental health. However, it takes more than a writer to solve mental health issues.

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Levy told us, "I'm certainly not a clinician. I didn't wanna pretend to be one. I did research, and I understood the topic. But I'm not trained on how to help folks one-on-one. I'm hoping that the collaboration of my story and the professional folks can start to help address these issues for young people." As such, Levy brought in experts from the Berman Center, a mental health facility in Sandy Springs, to discuss these issues with the audience once the play was done.

Listening in on this after-show "talk back" was both illuminating and encouraging. Not only were the experts informative and approachable, but the audience was also engaged in this discussion. One audience member even asked about how body image anxiety affected transgender people, which was not covered by the play itself.

## On Authorship

In addition to his play, we asked Aaron Levy about being a professional writer. We asked Levy about how English students aspiring to be professional storytellers could best create works that have meaningful messages or social commentary. Of course, writing a story that is both fun and thought-provoking is a nuanced topic that requires more time to teach than what an hour-long interview could provide.

Instead, Levy told us what aspiring writers can expect when writing stories with messages. "If you're gonna try to address something in a creative fictional way that is really sensitive, you should have the grace that you're not an evil person."

Levy mentions that many writers these days often receive harsh criticism for trying to depict sensitive issues or even accidentally depicting them. While he admits that some of this criticism comes from a good place, public backlash is a valid concern for writers, many of whom fear online harassment or their work being banned. When asked about the best way to critique authors publicly, he told us, "Let's not judge the author by what they write, but try to help the author address some of the things they're writing about."

## Becoming a Writer

One of the topics that Aaron Levy was the most enthusiastic about was how Kennesaw State University's English Department can help students begin their writing careers. *The Student Body* is a play written by a KSU professor, but he hopes that the department will help students produce their own projects. Levy notes that students are already working on scripts and short films, so he tells us that the English Department should "figure out how to help them, and so that they're doing it right."

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One of Professor Levy's core tenets as an English professor is "writing for bigger and better than a grade" and "not writing for an audience of one." Levy and professors like him don't want students to write assignments that are only suited to one teacher's expectations. Instead, they want students to write as if they have an audience and coworkers in the writing room. This can include stage and table readings for public audiences in order to develop student scripts with the goal to send out to competitions with hopes of winning and getting produced.

During our interview, Levy told us these opportunities are already happening in KSU's English Department. If professors and students continue to push for this professionalizing direction, perhaps the next *The Student Body* will come from a student.

## Conclusion

*The Student Body* is a play worth seeing the next time it airs. It is a heartwarming and heartwrenching story about troubled teens and the adults in their lives with just enough humor to balance the serious social commentary. Arguably, however, its biggest contribution is the lessons that both its story and its author can teach to aspiring writers here at KSU.

Even during this highly politicized time where any work can and will receive backlash from all over the political spectrum, stories with messages like *The Student Body* can still be worth producing. We just need to give aspiring writers the grace and the support they need to write what is in their hearts without fear or judgment.





# PERSPECTIVES ON AI: PART I

Written by Gwen Samford

Generative artificial intelligence models like ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot have recently exploded in popularity, but one group remains divided on how beneficial these technological advancements really are: artists and creatives. How can human ingenuity continue to thrive during a time when large language models can quickly produce massive amounts of recycled text? Could these tools be used in such a way as to *enhance* human creativity – and are the benefits worth the risks?

These are the kinds of questions that Kennesaw State University students and faculty are critically and passionately discussing. Four professors, a graduate research assistant, and an alumnus from the Department of English shared their thoughts to give an overview of the wide spectrum of perspectives held across the department.

## **Q: What is your background and/or experience so far with AI technologies?**

*Dr. Kurt Milberger:* I've been following and writing about the effects of generative language models on the publishing industry since the release of chatGPT (and the temporary shuttering of Clarksworld magazine's submission system). Incorporating discussion and research about these developments into my classes, I've also been fortunate to learn and argue about these issues with brilliant students in our MAPW program, especially James Blakely, whose capstone studied "AI Literacies in the Composition Classroom," Jacob Westberry, and Mallory Bowen, who are all working in this field.

*Professor Jeffrey Greene:* My research is in the areas of game studies and narratology, and so I started out using an older version of chatGPT in an app called DungeonAI. I've seen how the technology has evolved a bit in the earlier versions of GPT before GPT 3 and the big rollout and investing boom. I'm a creative writer. My publishing, though, has been in the areas of game studies and, earlier on, technical communication. I also had a career before this in IT and a bit of CSE. So, I'm a humanities person that has had a foot in the digital world for a long time.

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**Dr. Jeanne Law:** I am a professor of English specializing in digital literacies, media literacies, as well as multimodal writing. I've always taught digital writing and did a lot of work with digital historical rhetorics and oral histories for my dissertation. Before I was an academic, I was a speech writer and policy writer in the nonprofit and government sectors, and so I've always been at the frontier -- even if it's a jagged frontier -- of exploring different types of writing technologies.

**Professor Anna Weinstein:** I have very little background or experience working with AI. As a screenwriter, I have avoided it, really tied to the idea that we are generating our own content! Our voices are everything in screenwriting, so I've been reluctant to experiment and see what AI would come up with, especially since it would be pulling from content and voices that someone else created.

**Serenity Hill:** I have used AI as an instructor and as a student, and the best way I have been able to use it and present it to students is as a way to begin their writing and research process. I have used it in the classroom and for my research as a database to discover and collect new information, generate ideas, and decipher inputted data.

**Jacob Westberry:** Before this past June, I had zero experience with AI technologies. This changed when I signed up for a summer class called "Intro to Prompt Engineering", which was taught by Dr. Law. It was eye-opening to say the least. Currently, I am a Graduate Research Assistant working alongside Dr. Law on various AI projects for KSU. I'm focusing mainly on finding scholarly articles and outside research to formulate a literature review that discusses AI usage in education and how it could shape future pedagogies. While AI technologies have not fully integrated themselves into my everyday life, my usage and understanding of them have provided benefits in increasing my productivity and judgements on finding spaces where AI can be used effectively.

## **Q: What are some pros of generative AI? What are some cons?**

**Dr. Milberger:** I have yet to see a convincing demonstration of the pros of generative language models in the language arts. I'm told they can offer brainstorming support, editorial suggestions, stylistic feedback, and other textual grooming, but the tepid results never seem to me to match the effort necessary to make the models work. As [Stuart Selber](#) points out, AI "shifts, rather than saves, time and money." In an academic context, the starkest cons I've seen fall into the category of what we might call corner cutting. In my classes, this turns up in drafts, discussion board posts, even quiz answers, and the drawback is, although students will sometimes provide the correct answer (if the LLM can guess it), they're not actually learning for themselves, and they're certainly not taking the time to check whether the model is correct.

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**Dr. Law:** One of the biggest pros would be that the use of these large language models reduces workload, so I can be the creative writer that I want to be. I can also delegate tedious tasks like summarizing meeting notes, preparing agendas, writing emails, those kinds of things. I think the biggest con is that we talk a lot about ethics. We could talk a lot -- and I do in my classes -- about external ethical issues, like how much power it takes to generate outputs, what the labor conditions are with the human beings who train generative AI, right? I have models that I present and test with students on ethical input, getting ethical output, and all of the things that a human at the helm has to do. You can't just input something and let it go. You have to be the human in charge of that output. We've surveyed over 1500 students and over 3500 Coursera adult learners about how they use generative AI, and we have very few students using it to actually circumvent or bypass their learning or their writing. Most students are using it to brainstorm or to edit.

**Professor Weinstein:** I recently went to the international Screenwriting Research Network conference in the Czech Republic and attended a panel on AI. Two of the presenters were discussing the negatives that we've all heard about/worried about in terms of writers trying to take shortcuts and the AI program generating language that doesn't sound "human." One of the presenters found a very positive way to use AI. He prompted by describing the story beats so far in his screenplay and asking for suggestions of what might happen next. AI came up with five or ten really bad ideas (ideas that we've all seen 1,000 times before), so he asked for more suggestions and got another five or ten bad ideas. He discovered that it was a great way to come up with a list of bland/stock story beats, which helped him think outside the box for new ideas. Personally, I think this is a terrific way to help us identify when we're just repeating turns in a story that we've seen again and again in film and television.

**Professor Greene:** There's a lot you can do with Gen AI in terms of ideation and developing ideas. Now the cons, there's a lot. There are ethical issues in how some of these models were trained. There's major copyright issues. There's equity and accessibility issues that are arising because the companies that are producing Gen AI are trying to monetize it. We're seeing a world where some people -- rich people -- have access to premium versions of AI and some people won't. There's also some major privacy and security concerns when it comes to Gen AI. Another con is when they're used as arbiters of information: there's a high risk of misinformation, AI hallucination, or bias based on the training.

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## **Q: What is something students, or people in general, may not know about AI?**

*Dr. Law:* I think what in general people don't know is this idea of prompt engineering, for which I've developed a model called the Rhetorical Prompt Engineering process. Writing is the best way to converse with generative AI and anybody who's good at language can be an effective prompt engineer. You don't have to know how to code to engage with a generative AI assistant and get an ethical output.

*Professor Greene:* We've been using some form of generative AI for a long time. If you have been using auto correct on your phone, for example, you've already been using Gen AI to a certain extent. Another thing is people don't really seem to know how much human involvement there is actually in the development of Gen AI. The outputs theoretically get better because you have real human beings who are essentially scoring them.

*Dr Milberger:* Despite tech companies' insistence to the contrary, large models "remember" a percentage of their training data and can be coaxed into reproducing it verbatim. Many models (including those developed by Open AI) rely on "shadow prompting" systems whereby the chatbot translates user requests to meet the abilities, limitations, and other parameters (e.g., content moderation) of the system. What you type into the system is not necessarily directly connected to what the system outputs, especially in response to controversial topics. Each AI assisted Google search consumes ten times the energy of a regular Google search and requires about the same amount of energy (3 watt-hours) as leaving a light on in your home for one hour. Every 10-50 responses from GPT3 consumes about one bottle of water to cool the servers.

## **Q: What benefits do you think AI technologies could contribute to academia? What are some potential risks?**

*Dr Law:* In the humanities, one of the benefits is that it does give us a chance to have a voice at the table. Oftentimes in technological innovations, we don't get that opportunity. Now, because generative AI operates on natural language processing, we get that opportunity. That's a huge moment for us. I think one of the cons might be, or the risks might be, our response as educators. I think the biggest risk is that we aren't embracing AI literacy -- which is different than embracing generative AI.

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**Professor Weinstein:** I've had scholars submit abstracts for books and conferences that were very clearly generated by AI. I find that disturbing. I understand, though, that there are scholars who use AI regularly and are very skilled at using it to enhance their work. I'm sure I've read material co-created with AI and I didn't detect that AI was involved. I'm not quite sure how I feel about that.

**Professor Greene:** It can be used in research, in terms of speeding up research, analyzing quantitative data. I use AI right now to give me summaries of long articles, not in lieu of reading them, but to decide whether I want to read them and how to best spend my limited research time. As long as these things aren't being used to circumvent critical thought, I think they can be good tools. The problem with Gen AI is it gives you one answer, and if people just come to rely on that answer, it can be really easy to promote misinformation or even control the flow of information that way. I don't think the positives outweigh the negatives.

**Dr Milberger:** I'll believe in the benefit of AI technology when it's used to address administrative bloat and streamline the too many procedural tasks we're all asked to accomplish with every day. Give me an AI that lowers the cost of tuition, makes housing more affordable and easier to obtain, broadens access to healthcare, facilitates food distribution among the campus population, and helps ease traffic congestion and parking problems on campus. Give me an AI that gives students and professors more time to read, converse, create, recreate, and think deeply in meaningful solitude. The risks, though, seem to outweigh the potential benefits. Especially in the English department, AI paired with pressure to increase class sizes and the number of classes per instructor (often for less pay) will surely risk increased job loss and precarity, drive down the quality of education, and threaten the essential place of first-year composition in the curriculum.

## **Q: What are your thoughts on AI, copyright issues, and training models on creators' intellectual property?**

**Dr Milberger:** With very, very few exceptions, large language models only exist because their developers have scraped the public internet and outright stolen the copyright protected work of countless artists, writers, and other creatives for training purposes. And they admit as much. Big tech has no respect for individual intellectual property rights, and it remains to be seen whether the courts will side with them. In the meantime, any discussion about the ethical use of AI must acknowledge this reality and also emphasize the fact that everything users put into the system becomes a part of the pool, raising both copyright and privacy concerns, especially when students are required to interact with these systems.

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**Professor Weinstein:** I find it disturbing that publishers are making money from selling my work.

**Dr Law:** What the Copyright Office of the federal government said recently was that there has to be a distinction for copyright legally between AI generated and human led, AI Assisted writing. So what that means is that anything AI generated by itself cannot be copyrighted, but human guided AI assisted content creation can be copyrighted. If you iterate with your AI assistant, and you go back and forth, taking what computer scientists call multiple shots -- what I call multiple conversations -- at some point, it's more human than AI. If we start with the argument that everything that a large language model has taken up as a data set -- that all of that is copyright infringement -- then it logically follows that anything that's an output is plagiarized content. So I think we have to find a common ground, because I just don't think that argument I just articulated is practical or workable when you have something as large as generative AI that has already transformed the way professionals produce content.

**Westberry:** This has been somewhat of a gray area in AI spaces in not giving credit where credit is due, and I see this as a growing problem. Personally, I think that whatever outputs AI provides that are derived from well-known sources or was inspired/influenced by someone else's intellectual property should credit the original source, including AI-generated images. It is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish real information from fake information in the AI age with deepfakes and audio generation, and it can affect anyone who is trying to establish a creative identity or simply wanting to learn the truth about something. As creators, our IPs are incredibly dear to us, so lowering the amount of infringement done on our works, whether through copyright violations or not, is important and we should feel obligated to protect our works from designed misinterpretation or malpractice, no matter what.

**Professor Greene:** I struggle with this question, because the effective and really useful models were trained on work that was copywrit. It wasn't supposed to be used, necessarily, for AI in this way. Is there an ethical use of this technology at all when it was trained on work that was owned by others that wouldn't have wanted their work to be used that way? That's a fundamental question. I don't really have a great answer for that. I've had people argue with me and say: what's the difference between you going to a museum as a human being and looking at the art and being inspired by it, and what an AI might be doing when it takes the art and essentially studies it for use? And my answer is, those two things are totally different, because the AI can do this cross scale of millions. You, as a human, will only be able to see so much art within your lifetime. There are some examples of smaller LLMs where they're being developed and trained only on work that people have essentially opted into. You think that's great and ethical, and it is. The problem there, it's not that useful because they don't have the massive data set that these bigger models use.

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## Conclusion

Based on the variety of responses, it's clear that the debate on the use of large language models in creative spaces is a nuanced topic. As more and more companies invest in AI technologies, these conversations will only become more important. Thank you to all the professors and researchers who took the time to share their thoughts.

## Notes

*We're grateful to members of the English Department's Fall 2024 Artificial Intelligence Roundtable, as well as their student and alumni collaborators, for sharing their thoughts on this developing topic. Due to the depth and breath of responses, this is the first of a two-part feature, and we'll share the second half in our next issue.*

*How was AI used in the process of writing this story?*

*The author used AI transcription technology to transcribe recordings of verbal interviews. Otherwise, AI was not used, and humans fully carried out the brainstorming, writing, and editing of this article.*

# POETIC PERSISTENCE

## Department of English Faculty Members Release their Debut Poetry Collections

Written by Jenny Rissen

Greg Emilio: *Kitchen Apocrypha*. Able Muse Press, 1773491709

Kristin Rajan: *Shadows*. Finishing Line Press, 979-8888384992

Valerie Smith: *Back to Alabama*. Sundress Publications, 1951979648

Chris Martin: *Firmament*. Wandering Aengus Press, 9798218063078

Kennesaw State University Department of English faculty members are dedicated to inspiring the next generation of writers. It is therefore no surprise that these educators are leading their students by example, blazing the path toward publication. We are pleased to announce that several faculty members recently published their debut poetry collections, inspiring students to realize their own dreams. These authors include Dr. Valerie A. Smith (*Back to Alabama*), Dr. Greg Emilio (*Kitchen Apocrypha*), Dr. Kristin Rajan (*Shadows*), and Professor Chris Martin (*Firmament*). Each unique collection demonstrates the personal resolve and persistence writers must possess to reach their publication goals. It also represents years of dedication to perfecting the craft of poetry—insights these authors are eager to share with their students.

### In Compilation

Compiling a poetry collection takes persistence and time—more time than writers may anticipate. Professor Chris Martin confirms that many of his poems are from more than ten years prior, dedicating years to cultivating a vision for his collection. In fact, Martin proudly affirms that he submitted an early concept of *Firmament* for his capstone project as a student in Kennesaw State University's Master of Professional Writing program. Upon returning to the project, Martin states that it felt like "reuniting with a dear friend after a long silence—there's so much to say, but you don't know where to begin..." Dr. Greg Emilio agrees. "Putting a book together goes at a glacial pace." His poetry collection, *Kitchen Apocrypha*, was based on the manuscript for his doctoral dissertation and written over a period of five years. After that, "the manuscript went through no less than five rounds of diligent copyediting. It's a shockingly long process." It is important for students interested in publication to know that this will take time and to not give up hope.



# POETIC PERSISTENCE

## In Craft Work

While the process can be lengthy, students must work diligently to stay in the writing mode and be harbored within writing environments. Dr. Kristin Rajan affirms that students should “keep writing for the sake of writing.” Rajan explains that “the practice of writing promotes awareness, compassion, intelligence...and power.... Just keep writing.” Rajan recommends that students get involved in writing workshops, attend poetry slams, and share their work with others. Using her phone’s Notes app feature also proves as a helpful tool. It’s also important to “keep reading...and listening to others.” Dr. Emilio echoes Rajan’s sentiment, saying that his advice is to “be stubborn. Keep submitting, keep revising.”

## In Submitting to Publications

The journey to publication in the poetry genre looks different than in other genres. Dr. Valerie A. Smith credits the literary journals that published her poems as a catalyst toward her manuscript acceptance and subsequent printing by Sundress Publications. “I learned that editors may be more inclined to choose a collection in which roughly 20% of the poems had been published. Once I had twenty poems published, I began submitting my manuscript to presses listed in *Writer’s Chronicle* and *Poets & Writers*.” This industry standard runs counter to other genres, where to be published, the work must not have appeared in other publications. In contrast, Dr. Emilio credits his publication to the contest system. “I submitted my manuscript to the Able Music Book Award; it was a finalist, subsequently offered [for] publication.” This process can take years. All agree the best course of action is to be persistent and deliberate.

## In the Waiting

While working on your debut poetry collection, professors agree that keeping your love of the genre at the forefront of your mind is mission critical to having your work published. Dr. Smith wishes to inspire students to “keep writing. The more we write, the more we find our writing voice and what works for us on the page. The act of writing generates more ideas.” She goes on to explain that a healthy dose of reading is of equal importance. “Find out who your favorite writers are and really think about why their words and styles resonate with you.” Dr. Kristin Rajan concurs, urging students to “see the world as a writer and continue to put words on a page.” It is of equal importance to keep “the why” in mind. Poetry is a genre of writing that is best when left to interpretation. Writing poetry provides writers with opportunities to explore the world around them in a compact, powerful manner.

# POETIC PERSISTENCE

Dr. Emilio says that “Poetry, like cooking, is one of the best ways for me to slow down, to pay attention to the world around me, to see how one thing connects with another.” Dr. Rajan explains that “Writing poetry promotes a reciprocal relationship of becoming more observant and mindful.” These professors have had their share of obstacles in becoming a published author but urge students to keep moving forward. Dr. Rajan encourages students to “submit to journals and contests...but don’t let rejections seep into your sense of self—fail forward.”

## Teaching Philosophy

While each professor’s route to publication looks different, studying their respective journeys offers students a considerable amount of insight to those hoping to do the same. Moreover, studying under these authors offers critical insight into the mind of the writer. These professors understand that teaching the next generation of aspiring poets is a great responsibility; one that they rejoice in having the opportunity to do so.

Dr. Kristin Rajan believes that fostering a creative environment allows students to “explore deeply, through creativity and discussion [in] this one, precious life.” Her philosophy is that the course “is not a hoop to jump, to get a grade, to get a degree, to get a life, this *is* life.” Professor Chris Martin agrees that fostering a creative environment is key to student success but adds that “curiosity and empathy” are at the heart of his approach. Dr. Valerie A. Smith challenges her students to share ideas and conceptualizations with their fellow peers and adds that “the process of writing is often just as important as the final product...drafting and revising is where writers are still trying to figure out what we need to say.” Importantly, Dr. Greg Emilio stated that “poetry is the root of all literary arts...It makes us focus on the small things—the syllable, the line, the image—so that in prose we don’t take for granted the perfectibility of the sentence.”

These talented professors carried these philosophies into their respective poetry collections.

## Conclusion

“Writing poetry is a wonderful way of inciting delight and mindfulness.” - Dr. Greg Emilio

While their journeys through poetry and publication vary, Professors Smith, Rajan, Emilio, and Martin’s roads are intertwined with years of dedication to the craft of poetry, its collaborative spirit, marked with patience, and steadfast persistence in pursuing their dreams. Inspiring students to remain hopeful, to keep writing, and to keep chasing their dreams is at the forefront of their work; they are eager to help you chase your dreams and achieve your goals.

# POETIC PERSISTENCE

## Greg Emilio

*Kitchen Apocrypha* (Able Muse Press). Saint Teresa de Avila, the mystic Carmelite nun from the 16th century, said that even in the kitchen God is among the pots and the pans. This is a fairly good thesis for *Kitchen Apocrypha*. Across the collection, I'm looking for the ways that food, faith, and eros intersect, and to capture their triangulation in poetry. These apocryphal (sometimes heretical) poems range from reinterpretations of famous biblical food moments (forbidden fruit, water into wine, the last supper, etc.) to modern odes on such holy things as risotto, barbecue, and Waffle House. The poems are formally diverse as well; there are sonnets, sestinas, villanelles, and plenty of blank or free verse. I hope the book, like any good meal, nourishes the body as well as the heart and the soul.

## Kristin Rajan

*Shadows* (Finishing Line Press) is a compilation of four long poems tracing my journey with family and self. These poems trace the dynamics of love and loneliness and the movement to an awareness of pain outside my own. This awareness of others' struggles has been key for me, in realms outside of family as well, even in politics (REALLY challenging). Anchored by Thich Nhat Hanh's epigraph: "Compassion is born from understanding suffering," and set against a backdrop of the evocative photography of Laura Bendoly, this personal collection represents a journey from delicate pain to empathy. My hope is that the deeply personal approach will touch a universal chord.

## Valerie Smith

In *Back to Alabama* (Sundress Publications), I explore the complexities of identity, heritage, womanhood, faith, and justice. The poems are lyrical and expressive, mostly written in free verse without end rhyme and regular meter, with some sonnet variations and experimental forms that reflect content and tone. Roughly forty poems are divided into four major sections: my family history, cultural admirations, my faith journey, and my love for nature. Some poems, like *Legion: For We Are Many*, are emotionally challenging, while other poems, like "The Sugar Shack" are fun and energetic. Through this collection, I hope readers are inspired to seek connections to community, social justice, and spirituality for themselves.

## Chris Martin

*Firmament* (Wandering Aengus Press), is a word that jumped out at me from the poem "My Children Gather Blue Jay Feathers," one of the newest in the book. I'd been struggling with a title, and that word, fittingly, held everything in place. The oldest poems in it go back fifteen years or more, and I began visualizing it as a collection about ten years ago. I submitted the earliest version of it for my MAPW capstone, in fact, under the title *Second Coming on South Cobb Drive*. So much has changed since then, yet nothing much has, and here it is. It's kind of like reuniting with a dear friend after a long silence—there's so much to say, but you don't know where to begin. It's a collection of free-verse narratives, more or less, about herons, deer, ghosts, inner childhood, place, spirituality, things like that.

# VISITING FACULTY FELLOW: DR. SAAD BOULAHNANE

Interviewed by Erin Bahl

*The KSU English Department welcomed Dr. Saad Boulahnane, assistant professor of English at Hassan I University in Morocco, as the department's inaugural international faculty fellow during Fall 2024. Toward the end of his visit, he graciously met with the social media team for an interview on his experiences as faculty fellow. We are grateful to Dr. Boulahnane for sharing his thoughts and reflections from his visit to KSU!*

## **Please introduce yourself!**

My name is Dr. Saad Boulahnane. I am an assistant professor of English at Hassan First University in Settat, a small city between Casablanca and Marrakesh. I obtained a BA in English studies, a master in Moroccan American Studies, and then a doctorate in religion and politics. I had the opportunity to go to Colorado State University in Fort Collins, about 60 miles from Denver, on the Fulbright Program. I was an instructor of Arabic for an academic year, 2014-2015. I also work now as the coordinator of the department of foreign languages, and we refer to it as the Department of transversal or interdisciplinary studies. So I usually publish on education, Applied Linguistics, travel writing, media in this course.

## **Before your arrival, what were some of your expectations or goals for your international faculty fellowship period here?**

The itinerary was much busier than I expected (in a good way!) I've learned a lot, and I have established so many relationships and collaborations. I'm working on a research study on how AI is used by students, and how students rationalize their use of AI tools. I've had the opportunity to collaborate with one of the professors of Kennesaw State as a co-author, and I've had the chance to meet people, invite them to Morocco, and work with them on many resources.



# VISITING FACULTY FELLOW

## After spending a couple weeks engaged with KSU faculty and students, what are some of just your impressions of the KSU community?

I would say my impressions of the KSU community have been exceptionally positive. One of the things I've noticed is the high-paced life here, and how invigorating it is. It's a characteristic of an advanced environment that's conducive to learning. The students and professors have so many duties and activities: they're working on their research and teaching, and there's also so much service. I think there's a lot of palpable energy that fosters collaboration and innovation, and a lot of positive vibes coming from students, faculty, and staff. Whether during my public lecture on travel writing and the Occident, or during my class visits so far, the students participated, asked very interesting questions, and engaged in thought-provoking discussions. I've really enjoyed every single class I've visited here.

## What are some of the highlights of your visit to both the KSU and the surrounding community so far?

In addition to the academic work and activities I've been part of, I think one of the most interesting visits was to the Atlanta MLK Museum and Ebenezer Church. It was a profoundly moving experience that really resonated with me. I was able to see firsthand the conditions that shaped Doctor King and the Civil Rights Movement. I teach American culture, and I talk about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King and other influential figures. But this month, I was able to visit these historic sites in person. That was an overwhelming experience for me.



# VISITING FACULTY FELLOW

## **What are some of your main takeaways from the faculty fellowship period?**

I have gained invaluable insights into the academic environment here, which is characterized by a vibrant community, committed collaboration, and innovation. And I think engaging with the esteemed faculty members has also enriched my understanding of various teaching methodologies. In attending their classes, I had the chance to look at how they teach and reconsider my own teaching and assessment methods, which was a very enriching experience. I have also deepened my research horizon on how AI impacts students, which has been the focus of many challenging discussions for colleagues.

The connections that I've established with faculty and students have opened avenues for future collaborations. I'm excited about the potential for ongoing partnerships between KSU and my home institution. And I also had the opportunity to talk to Paula Almond and Jay Ingram about student accommodations for students with different disabilities and counseling services for those who might be struggling. I intend to bring this experience as part of the takeaways to my home institution, and maybe propose counseling services.

## **What's your vision for continued collaboration between KSU and Hassan the First University and just for expanding Moroccan-American University partnerships?**

I think my vision for continued collaboration between the two institutions involves fostering long-term academic partnerships that emphasize joint research projects and faculty exchanges. I'd like to see more faculty fellows like myself visit KSU, and to have American fellows come to my institution. I'd like to see this tradition continuing into the future. I envision creating a framework for collaborative initiatives that allow our institutions to share knowledge and resources effectively.

# VISITING FACULTY FELLOW

## **What recommendations would you especially want to offer KSU students and faculty about global education and international partnerships?**

I think my recommendations would be for both students and faculty to actively seek opportunities for cross-cultural engagement and learning. Whether through study abroad programs or collaborative research projects or participating in international conferences. I believe that embracing a global perspective is essential in today's interconnected world. One facet of my work is on orientalism, racism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, et cetera. I have come to the conclusion that these concepts thrive on distance and ignorance. And if students and faculty are able to visit other places, I think they would form a sense of empathy towards the "other," leading to this "other" possibly becoming a friend. The idea of the "other" we have is always obscure, even scary and intimidating. But I think if we visit other cultures, we will most likely take on a different perspective and understand that your culture is not necessarily superior. I would recommend seeking opportunities for global education, to go on these journeys in order to learn.

One idea I'd like to close with: René Descartes has a philosophy of cogito ergo sum [I think, therefore I am], which I think might offer a parochial perspective. And I recommend replacing it with another philosophy, which is studio ergo sum: "I study, therefore I am." I believe in the need to study the other, go visit the other, get to know the other, rather than just stay at a distance and assume things about the other.

## **Are there any final thoughts you'd like to share?**

The people here have been very generous, very welcoming, very kind, and very attentive to my ideas and concerns. The students are lucky to be here. So much technology, so much research, so many caring professors, a lot of services. Every individual here has been very helpful, so I would like to thank everyone. It's a really eye-opening experience, and it's one of the greatest moments I've had in my life— this visit to KSU.

Specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Nina Morgan for making our discussion today possible. Without her, this whole experience would not have happened. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. John Havard, who has done incredible work in making this fellowship possible. That man is incredible.

# READY PLAYER JUAN BY DR. CARLOS GABRIEL KELLY GONZÁLEZ

Written by Moki Murillo

Published in November 2023, *Ready Player Juan: Latinx Masculinities and Stereotypes in Video Games* received the 2024 International Latino Book Award, which honors authors, illustrators, and translators for books written in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Written by one of Kennesaw State University's very own faculty, the book analyzes the topic of representation in video games, specifically how Latino masculinity is depicted in gaming.

The English Broadside was honored to interview *Ready Player Juan's* author, Carlos Gabriel Kelly González. Professor Kelly González has plenty to say about the representation of Latinos in the growing video game industry.

## Please introduce yourself!

My name is Carlos Gabriel Kelly González, and I was born and raised in the Tijuana-San Diego borderlands in Southern California. I am a proud first-generation Mexican American who is the first in my family to receive a PhD in the US.





# READY PLAYER JUAN Q&A

## What is your background in video games and game analysis?

My video gaming days began with the original Nintendo. Because I loved the variety of systems and video games, I would regularly visit neighbor friends just to play Atari games; one neighbor knew I loved to play so much that they moved their Space Invaders arcade cabinet into the garage, and when I knocked, they opened the garage door and let me play for hours. I didn't have a PC until I was 14, so I would visit another friend to watch them play StarCraft, which is the game that taught me how to type. I always loved video games growing up, yet I didn't know I could study video games until I visited Ohio State University as a prospective PhD student.

At OSU, I decided to focus on analyzing video game storytelling while pursuing a PhD in Latinx Studies. In most of my classes, regardless of subject area, I wrote about video games so that I could work out early ideas and gather as much video game research as I could. In my research, I focus on utilizing US Latine (the gender-neutral form of Latino or Latina) perspectives to analyze video game stories regardless of whether Latines are present in the game as characters or not. I infuse Latine borderlands perspectives and autoethnography to analyze storylines and to argue that video games are borders, which broadens storytelling possibilities and challenges the current trend of academic perspectives used to analyze games.

## Please give a brief description of your book *Ready Player Juan*.

*Ready Player Juan* is the first book of its kind. I examine the stereotypical ways Latino masculinities [in male bodies] are represented in video games. By theorizing the borderlands and my lived experience as a fronterizo (border crosser), I create new ways of analyzing and challenging how game developers and studios choose to see Latines in video games.

I coined the term "digital mestizaje," which posits how players (or any consumer of digital media) bring a sense of self that then experiences cultural mixtures when crossing into a video game or encountering a digital object. Through our digital interactions, we learn and accumulate experiences that can create new ways of seeing/being in users.

# READY PLAYER JUAN Q&A

## **Congratulations on your gold award for this year's International Latino Book Awards! Please tell us a bit about the awards and their significance. What does this award mean to you?**

I was honored to attend the 26th annual International Latino Book Awards and to be around such excellence from the Latine community. These awards provide Latine writers a platform to celebrate our work and that of our community.

This award is particularly powerful for me in that it provides a deep sense of validation, and even more special is that it comes from my Latine community. I consistently tell students (and anyone who will listen) that I was never the smart kid growing up and that I even thought I was stupid as a young boy; in that sense, this award is a callback to that young self of mine to tell him that we did something truly special. I still walk around smiling all huge when I think, "I'm an Award-Winning Author," an achievement beyond my wildest dreams.

In another way, this award also signifies the importance of the work I do and how novel and necessary it is to challenge the ways in which the US and the world perceive Latines, especially in video games. It is truly humbling to have the first book on Latines and Video Game Studies and to have it be awarded gold for Best Academic Themed Book.

## **What inspired you to write a book about Latine masculine representation in gaming?**

As an avid gamer, I never saw myself or my community represented in positive ways through a video game story. There were also very few articles and zero full-length books on Latines in video games even though we are the number one ethnic group to play video games in the US. These gaps led to the question: how can I write about Latines in video games if we are hardly ever represented?

Inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa and her creative scholarly work, I set out to reevaluate my life on the borderlands as a potential way to reexamine all video game experiences as border crossings, and from there, I theorized Latine ways of seeing and theoretical approaches to challenge game studies and game developers to see Latines.

# READY PLAYER JUAN Q&A

## **Please share some of your experiences in writing this book. What were some of the most challenging and/or rewarding parts of the process?**

The most challenging part about this project was dissertating while teaching and being on the job market. This book came from my dissertation, and so without that struggle and continual work, it would not have made it out into the world. Daily for nine months, I worked over Zoom for one to three hours with D'Arcee Neal (my dear colleague and homie), and then once I had a contract, and outside readers, I implemented their feedback and was on top of the deadlines set by the press.

In the final proofing stages, I had to index my book, which was tedious but also highly rewarding because through indexing the book myself I had direct knowledge of the key areas/moments within the book. Near the end of 2020, I had not written a single word of my dissertation, and I vividly remember texting my mentor, Frederick Aldama, that if I focused my dissertation on just video games, I could finish it more quickly. All he said was "go go go," and the rest is history.

## **What do you believe are the main shortcomings in the gaming industry when it comes to masculine Latine representation?**

There are many shortcomings, but I believe they stem mostly from the fact that most of the video game industry is made up of white men who don't know much or don't care enough to know much about Latines beyond the stereotypes they consume and reproduce for audiences.

Another issue is the lack of funding and pipelines for US Latine talent, with many game companies' resources being directed toward Latin American creators and not US Latine experiences. We certainly need both perspectives, yet the US Latine experience is woefully misrepresented both in video games and on the developing side. Video game companies need to invest in the US Latine community through internships and talent pipelines by working with K-12 schools and hiring Latine creatives to join their writing teams.

## READY PLAYER JUAN Q&A

### **What are your thoughts on feminine or other gender Latine representation in gaming? Any similarities or differences from your stance on masculine representation?**

The gender binary is quite rigid when it comes to representing people in video games, yet some games are beginning to include new ways to broaden the binary, such as adding pronouns and more advanced character creation. When it comes to Latinas, they are less likely to be main characters unless in fighting or first-person shooter games, a similar dynamic to Latino characters.

The main issue with Latina characters is the overt sexualization and objectification of their appearances, with little attention paid to their stories. I am excited, though a bit skeptical, about the main character Lucia in the upcoming *Grand Theft Auto 6*, as it is an opportunity, one of the first, to have a Latina character lead such a powerful franchise. A giant missed opportunity I discuss in the book comes from the original plan to have Lara Croft be Laura Cruz, a South American munitions specialist. A Latina could have been the most iconic action hero in video games of the 20th century, and yet, her historical sexualization/objectification would have been doubly concerning, given the limited ways Latinas are given space in our media.

### **Are there any recent games, either Triple-A or indie, that you believe have good masculine Latine representation?**

I write about three in my book: two independent games *Guacamelee! 2* and *Life is Strange 2*, and one Triple-A title, *Spider-Man: Miles Morales*. All these games protagonize a Latine character. Each game is worth exploring to see the storytelling possibilities that center Latinas and our experiences. I would like to see more Triple-A games with Latinas as the protagonist, but independent games are more likely to do so. For me, it is important that Triple-A games center Latinas because they garner larger audiences, and thus, the potential learning and cultural mixtures while playing as a Latine can do wonders for reorienting and challenging the ways that gaming audiences see and think about Latinas.

# READY PLAYER JUAN Q&A

## **What impact do you hope that your book will bring about?**

I hope that *Ready Player Juan* inspires others to (pardon the pun) get into the game, whether it be as game designers/developers, storytellers, or academics. There is so much room for us as a community to make our presence known and to change the narratives about our communities. I hope that my book also inspires game developers to reach out to me and other creatives/scholars of color so we can help them with their stories and work together to create talent pipelines for Latines interested in video game careers.

## **Do you have any more thoughts about the book, representation, gaming, or anything else that you wish to share?**

Perhaps one of my greatest motivations while writing *Ready Player Juan* was to ensure that it was accessible, inviting readers to be part of the exploration into the intricacies of Latine theory and possibility in video games. I am a storyteller, so every chapter begins with anecdotes about my life playing video games or crossing the border or what borders signify in my life that then connect with each chapter's argumentative aims. Please give it a read!

## **Conclusion**

Representation is important in any medium, but arguably, the real challenge is presenting representation in a way that is both respectful and empowering. Learning how to do representation right can be worthwhile to any writer, whether they are writing for video games or other media. While each demographic has its own nuances and struggles in the stories they are depicted in, learning how to write Latine characters respectfully can be a good first step to writing better representation. If you want to take that first step or simply wish to learn more about Latino representation in video games, *Ready Player Juan* is available now for purchase in electronic form or in paperback. You can find it either on Amazon or the University of Arizona Press website.

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# THE ENGLISH BROADSIDE



**KENNESAW STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

NORMAN J. RADOW COLLEGE OF  
HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
*Department of English*

WHAT'S  
YOUR  
STORY?