



English Matters

This final issue of *English Matters* marks the end of another great academic year in the John Jay English department. We wish a fond farewell to our second group of graduating English majors—a group of 30 students whose remarkable achievements proudly represent our fledgling major program. Read on below to find out who was honored at our second annual English Major Awards Luncheon. You'll see why this joyous, boisterous year-end affair has become the highlight of the semester for the many faculty and students who attend.

But what of those poised, studious faces up there in this month's banner picture, you ask? Well, that's **Rashida Davis**, **Jayelle Dorsainville**, and **Christopher McConnell** (l to r), the three inspiring John Jay English B.As who will be graduating with Honors next Friday. We snapped this picture on May 11, when all three gathered around a conference table to present work from their honors theses. You'll hear more about their independent research projects in the article below, where they also share the wisdom they've gained from this intellectually challenging experience.

But first, some parting thoughts to carry you through the summer from our Department Chair, **Marny Tabb**, whose message this spring is doubly poignant. Prof. Tabb will be going on sabbatical next year, so she is passing the reins of the department to our new chair, and your former Major Advisor, **Allison Pease**. I can promise you'll be hearing plenty from Prof. Pease in the coming year. Not to mention Prof. **Caroline Reitz**, who will be the new Major Advisor going forward. For now, though, Prof. Tabb commands the stage, before the spotlight turns, at last and as it should, to you, our extraordinary students.

Chair's Message



A Valediction from the Outgoing Chair:

I have had the privilege of chairing our department during a momentous four years. The years were punctuated by our move from North Hall to 54th Street even as we monitored the construction of our new quarters, which we hope to occupy next year; by the implementation of our English Major after its lengthy preparation, begun during the terms of prior chairs; by the establishment of journalism and writing minors; and most recently by our preparation of a writing track for our major.

During this time I have headed a lively and populous community—over 130 full- and part-time faculty, upwards of 300 English and 250 Humanities and Justice majors, and an untold number of student minors. As chair I have spoken with many of you, more students that I can count—my own students of course but also those of many of my colleagues, who have come to praise, to complain, and most often for help resolving seemingly intractable bureaucratic problems.

Working with so many of you on such a variety of issues has taught me more about our department and college than I learned in all my previous decades as a professor, and it has vitally connected me with other departments and many administrative offices. This has been as richly rewarding an experience in its own way as my deeper acquaintance with so many of my English colleagues and the books they teach.

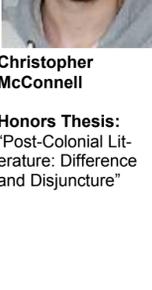
I hand over my beloved department to my able and altogether wonderful successor, Professor Allison Pease, as I head off for a sabbatical (a year's leave for research) where I get to spend my time with Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude and an abundance of early modern books on conduct and ruling. I'll be holed up in the Research Branch of the New York Public Library where the 16th and 17th centuries and I will be in lively conversation. I hope to see some of you there!

Student Research Showcases

We in the English Department are so impressed with the substantial research projects that our seniors have been working on that our faculty organized no less than four special showcases, where students presented their work to the wider John Jay community in professional setting modeled on an academic conference.

In this final issue of *English Matters*, though, we will zoom in on the work of three exceptional students—all of whom elected to pursue honors degrees. On May 11, all three gathered to present their research-in-progress to a substantial gathering of professors and student peers. Read on below to find out just what these students are writing about in their theses, and what advice they have for anyone contemplating this highly challenging course of study.

How challenging, you ask? Honors candidates must maintain an overall 3.5 GPA in their English major coursework, and they must write a substantial honors thesis (25pp. approximately) with their independent study advisor. In the past, some projects have emerged out of the senior seminar, while others developed from prior coursework that the student wished to take to the next level in an independent study. In fact, the only certain thing you can say about honors students is that each one's path is unique. Which, if you think about it, is precisely the point!



*The title of **Rashida Davis'** honors thesis is a quotation taken from **Nasir Jones**, better known as the hip-hop performer **Nas**. When asked to discuss her project, which she is pursuing under the direction of **Prof. Jonathan Gray**, this is what she had to say:*

My thesis is about the shared discourse of the narrative of U.S. law and Black expression. I use critical race theory, slave narratives, civil rights narratives, neoslave/prison narratives, and hip-hop songs to examine where the law and Black expression overlap. I also question the effect that these discourses have had on the solidarity of the Black community. I argue that, "By examining Black narratives, one can see an incessant demand for equality and an end to injustice; which ultimately condemns an unjust American judicial system that is designed to oppress Blacks and serve the interests of the elite." My thesis also shows that even as Black Expression reveals the interests of the elite—who are predominantly white, but who also include African Americans—"an unintended consequence of Black expression is that...it disrupts the solidarity of the Black community."

I began this process after I had taken an English elective class, *African American Autobiographies*, with Professor Gray. The class was so interesting that I asked him if he would do an independent study with me, so I could graduate with honors.

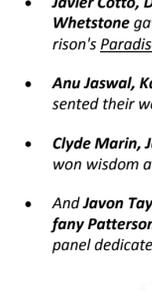
Rashida Davis

Honors Thesis: "We in chronic need of a second look at the law books, and the whole race dichotomy."

I was curious about what happened to activism in the Black community. Since I plan on attending law school, Professor Gray thought it would be appropriate to introduce me to critical race theory. After reading a few essays from Derrick Bell, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Cheryl Harris I began to develop my thesis.

I think Professor Gray is a great mentor. Our sessions were always full of critical thinking as well as laughs, which made the honors experience worthwhile. He worked really hard to avoid leading me to answers and often challenged my perspective on issues. He introduced me to a whole new world of literature and advocacy which I really appreciate.

As far as advice for other students, I would say make sure you choose a topic that you are passionate about. It makes the work a lot more interesting and pleasurable. Also, team up with a professor who is equally as passionate as you are.



*We also spoke with **Prof. Jonathan Gray** about his working relationship with his student:*

Rashida is a self-starter. She wants to figure things out for herself, not to have things explained to her. This is why we have such a good working relationship. Her hard work is obviously paying her dividends, but I think it is her intellectual curiosity that pushes her further. My overarching thesis for the African-American autobiography class was that Black writers were responding to a set of social conditions that shaped how they expressed themselves. Rashida flipped that on its side by pushing it into the law. It was a connection that I saw, but her thesis really teases out much of the nuance that I hadn't yet worked through myself. She is a legal theorist at heart, even if she doesn't realize it yet. It was a privilege to work with her.



*The two other honors students this year—**Jayelle Dorsainville** and **Christopher McConnell**—are both working with **Prof. Allison Pease** as part of an innovative independent study tutorial on the topic of *Indian post-colonial literature and theory*.*

My thesis focuses on the colonial encounter between the British and the natives of India & Africa. My essay analyzes four post-colonial novels: *The God of Small Things*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Heart of Darkness*, and *A Passage to India*. The ambivalence in these novels is what led me to my thesis. In my essay, I argue that it is one's imagined world that creates a sense of uncertainty within the novels. It is the ambiguity constrained within these imagined worlds, which taints our image of other's perceived world.

I had been thinking about taking part in an independent study for the past semesters. The ability to work once again with Professor Pease sealed the deal for me as she has a lot to offer her students and has been a great mentor for me.

In our Independent Study focusing on Post-Colonialism in India, I had the opportunity to work with Professor Pease and my fellow classmate/colleague Jayelle Dorsainville. Working with two bright minds allowed me to gain a different perspective on the works we read. This also allowed us to share our insights and feelings regarding these post-colonial works.

Students often come to me with many questions about the English honors thesis. I always encourage them to find a topic of interest and a professor willing to explore this theme with them in an independent study. Although the honors thesis requires a lot of work, I think it is a great opportunity for all English Majors.



Working with Professor Pease is easy because she is so personable, but it doesn't mean I can slack on my work. During the fall of 2010 she asked me if I'd like to join Chris in his independent study. I couldn't turn her down. She encourages free thinking, and she allowed us to take control of our own learning. We met once a week, and kept in constant contact via email. The honors thesis is independent and active learning. Students that are able to participate should not assume it will be easy. Choosing a topic that you have touched on, but not fully explored is the best advice. Prior to studying post-colonial literature in India, I had studied African "poco" literature. This gave me a better understanding of what I would encounter. I also sought out the help of my former Professors, and it positively affected my experience.

Jayelle Dorsainville

Honors Thesis: "Chasing Pavement: Post-Colonial Women"

For my thesis, I am trying to connect post-colonial literature and post-colonial theory. Gender and female subjugation has always interested me. Running with these themes, I found that the female characters in the books I have been reading all share a powerful emotion. They share a desire for autonomy, equality and power. They attempt to gain these desires through sex or the body. Sadly, using sex/desire as power does nothing for these women. Their place in the sex/gender system has already been made. I in no way separate these women from myself, but I also understand that there is no universal "woman's" experience. Taking into account their individual situations was essential to developing my thesis.

I would not have been able to complete such a task in my freshmen year, nor would I have had the resources. After completing this major my thought process has completely changed. Above all, I owe my education and wonderful college experience to the English Department. I cannot thank you all enough.



***Prof. Allison Pease** has been advising the honors theses for both **Jayelle** and **Christopher**. When we spoke with her, she had high praise for both students:*

Jayelle and Christopher took my LIT 300 Text and Context course on colonial and post-colonial African literature, and because LIT 300 is theoretically based with fewer primary texts, it really is the place where students begin to think deeply about texts. Jayelle and Christopher both wanted to pursue post-colonial theory further, and together we decided to shift the context to India for comparison. What is difficult about doing an honors project in a semester is completing enough reading to comprehend a subject deeply while leaving sufficient time to write a 25 page thesis. The three of us are struggling with that right now; I have to keep in mind these students also have all of their regular end of semester essays and exams while they are writing a very long and theoretical essay. But Jayelle and Christopher are great students: sharp readers, engaged intellectuals and eager to test their thoughts with me and each other. Working with them this semester has been one of the highlights of my teaching life.

Our Honors Students were the focus on the May 11 event, but this May there were four other panels of student presentations related to John Jay's "Celebrating Student Research and Creativity" initiative.

- **Javier Cotto, Desiree Mathurin, Alexandria Morris, John Sodaro and Sean Whetstone** gave conference papers on a panel entitled "Navigating Toni Morrison's *Paradise*."
- **Anu Jaswal, Kamar-Jay Foster, John Sodaro and Amanda Aponte-Moses** presented their work on the "English Potpourri" panel.
- **Clyde Marin, Jayelle Dorsainville and Stefan Seecharran** shared their hard-won wisdom at the first annual "English Major Experience Swap."
- **And Javon Taylor, Adriana Beach, Benjamin Passikoff, Anthony Thomas, Tiffany Patterson** (pictured l to r below) and **Anamika Kumari** presented on a panel dedicated to literature and ethics.



English Major Awards

It is now a tradition that, come the month of May, the English Department faculty members recognize several students in the English Major for their outstanding achievement in coursework, writing and leadership. The Annual English Luncheon and Awards Ceremony on Friday, May 20th was the festive occasion when this year's award recipients were announced.

Rashida Davis was named the Outstanding Graduate for 2010-11 academic year. She is pictured here with **Prof. Jonathan Gray**, her honors thesis advisor, who was on hand to present the award to her.

David Holder (with **Prof. Adam McKible**) won for the best essay in a 200-level course, "An Explication of Paul Lawrence Dunbar's 'We Wear The Mask'" (LIT 260).

Irina Panjkovic (with **Prof. Bettina Carbonell**) won the **Ed Davenport Award** for Best Essay in a 300-level course for "Sexuality and Race in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" (LIT 300).

Stacey Ann McAllister (with **Prof. Alex Long**) won for Best Fiction, "Chopped" (ENG 397).

Chad Infante (with **Prof. Baz Dreisinger**) won for the best essay in a 400-level course, "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life: Salvation and the Kingdom of Heaven" (LIT 405).

Jennifer Thomas (with **Prof. Alexander Long**) won for the best poem, "Rainy Season" (LIT 290).

Stephanie Rojas (with **Prof. Caroline Reitz**) won the Classroom Leadership Award, along with **Ismail Etienne**, **Anamika Kumari** and **Marlena Nadler** (not pictured).

Prof. Reitz also welcomed twelve new members of *Sigma Tau Delta*, the English Honor Society, and awarded Honor Stoles to six graduating members.

Editor **Lee Koch** was on hand to present the new issue of *The Quill*, John Jay's literary magazine, and to introduce readings by our award-winning student authors.

Students weren't the only ones to share their creativity. To kick off the luncheon, **Professor Alexander Long** read a poem in honor of his students; award recipients also received a copy of his latest book of poems, *Light Here, Light There*.

Reciting "Style in Slow Motion," Prof. Long reflected on a fateful night in the past, back when "I desired style then, / And thought it my gift to offer some."

For the extraordinary story of just what happened "then"—and what kind of insight it lead to—you'll have to check out the literary journal *Agni*, which published the poem in full here:

<http://www.bu.edu/agni/poetry/print/2009/70-long.html>.

A Look Ahead...

The new academic year will bring new leadership to the department. Before English Matters goes on hiatus over the summer, we thought we'd update you on the new personnel changes and what they'll mean for you.

- The English Department faculty has elected **Professor Allison Pease** the new Chair. What does this mean for the Department? "As Chair of the department I will now oversee all aspects of the department's work at the college, including but not limited to the English Major," says Prof. Pease. "I see myself as the primary advocate for our students and faculty at the college. I will continue to help English majors solve problems with courses, registration, and graduation. Feel free to come see me." Professor Pease can be reached at apease@jjay.cuny.edu.
- **Professor Caroline Reitz** will be filling Prof. Pease former role as the Major Advisor. Of her new role Prof. Reitz says, "As Program Coordinator and Major Advisor, I will be responsible for choosing which courses we teach and when, assigning faculty to teach those courses, and advising students as they pursue the B.A. in English. Next year we will have a team of 10 professors with open advising schedules each week, so I won't be your only option when it comes to advising, but I am always here to help." Professor Reitz can be reached at creitz@jjay.cuny.edu.

English Matters 3.5

is a more-or-less regular publication of the John Jay English Department for the instruction and delight of students in our major and minor programs. Questions? Comments? Complaints? Want to get involved? Contact the editors, Prof. Al Coppola, acoppola@jjay.cuny.edu, and Olivera Jokic, ojoikic@jjay.cuny.edu.