

# noted



Melissa Bailes is an Assistant Professor of English at Tulane University

It was a sunny fall Friday afternoon when I went to meet Professor Melissa Bailes at her office in Norman Mayer. After joking about how she had not yet decorated it (this is her first semester here, after all), she asked if I wanted to go get a cup of coffee—which I happily agreed to. This gesture reflects just how approachable and friendly of a professor she is. On the way to PJs we discussed how impressed she was by her students and the challenges of picking a reading list that spans centuries for the early British literature survey she's teaching in the spring. Once we sat down she asked me all about myself and offered advice on my upcoming paper (I am a student in her graduate seminar—The Nature and Culture of Eighteenth-Century Science). As her

## An Interview with Melissa Bailes

by: Brekke McDowell

student, I can say that she is a professor who genuinely makes an effort to get to know her students. During our time together she was never talking at me, but with me, and throughout the course of an hour we discussed topics ranging from Erasmus Darwin to Mardi Gras.

Professor Bailes attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where, although initially majoring in Biology, she was wooed away by literature classes and received her BA in English and History. Post graduation she followed the path of so many English majors and attended law school. After a short time there she “missed the literature” and returned to North Carolina to get an MA in English and a graduate certificate in Women’s and Gender Studies from UNC Greensboro. During her time there she studied the role of women in the Enlightenment and “that’s when it all started to click.”

Combining her initial love of science with her interest in literature and women’s studies, Bailes then went on to get her PhD from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her dissertation focused on women writers’ use of the natural sciences in long eighteenth-century (1660-1830) British literature. Bailes examines how “the natural sciences gave women an in,” a discourse for engaging with controversial topics within science’s seemingly objective framework, so that, for instance, botany became a tool for debating issues of gender and sexuality, zoology for concerns of hybridity and race, and geology for the politics of revolution.

*Continued on Page 3*



Booker Prize Winning Author A.S.  
Byatt to visit Tulane on Monday  
February 18 as part of our Great  
Writers Series

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**Supriya Nair** has been a professor of English at Tulane since 1992, teaching postcolonial literature, feminist literary theory, and, most recently, cultural studies courses on food, along with other ecocritical and environmental issues related to “humanimal” studies. She served as the director of the former Women’s Studies Program (now the Gender and Sexualities Studies Program) in the tumultuous aftermath of Katrina, and is currently the Director of Graduate Studies in the English department.

## Faculty Spotlight:

### Supriya Nair

interview by Carolyn Ruocco

She has traveled to various parts of the Caribbean, which is her specialized area of research and teaching. Perhaps it is her dynamic and multi-faceted set of interests that made it possible for her to teach courses and work simultaneously on two books, *Pathologies of Paradise: Caribbean Detours* (forthcoming, University of Virginia Press) and the recently published *Teaching Anglophone Caribbean Literature* in the MLA Options for Teaching series (2012). Nair says that difficult as this process was, it helped that both books complemented each other in such a way that working



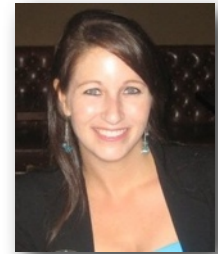
on one enriched and enabled her work on the other.

In *Pathologies of Paradise*, Professor Nair focuses on the two extremes through which the European and North American audiences in particular traditionally view the Caribbean: paradise (tourism, sun, beach and sand) and hell (poverty, disaster). While many of us tend to experience the Caribbean through a cruise ship or a five-star resort, anglophone Caribbean literature has a distinct “dark and brooding” aspect that does not fit the stereotype of a relaxed vacation spot. But the resilience portrayed in the literature, which can be carnivalesque in complicated ways, also counters the other pole of Caribbean representations as we see in mainstream press accounts of Haiti, for instance, as abject and disaster-prone. Professor Nair studies the unique juxtaposition of a brutal and convoluted history in what is considered a simple tropical paradise, with stories of resistance, humor, and celebration of Caribbean cultural identity. The book also features a chapter on Caribbean domestic fiction, which emphasizes Professor Nair’s interest in gender and feminism. Here, too, she avoids the binaries of gender conflict and demonstrates that both men and women suffered through and struggled against colonial slavery and servitude, violence and poverty, albeit in different ways.

*Teaching Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, edited by Professor Nair, is a collection of essays by various scholars in the United States, the Caribbean, UK, Australia, and Canada that discuss pedagogical issues in the field of

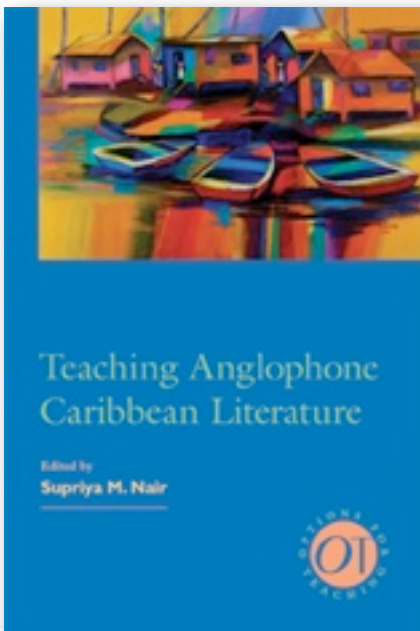
Caribbean literature. Because the Caribbean has a unique history which forced people from various continents together in the process of colonization, settlement, and slavery, the literature from this region is just as unique and diverse as the various “shards” of continents, as Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott puts it. The knowledge of this dynamic history of migration and creolization is vital to the understanding of the literature and a vibrant part of the various approaches to teaching it. ♦

## Alumni Spotlight



**Lauren Cardon** earned her Ph.D. in American Literature from Tulane in 2008 and is now a senior postdoctoral teaching fellow in the English Department as well as the Assistant Director of the Freshman Writing Program. Her book *The “White Other” in American Intermarriage Stories, 1945-2008* has just been released by Palgrave Macmillan Press. Building on previous studies by scholars of intermarriage and identity, Lauren’s book discerns the ways in which literature and films from the 1960s through 2000s rework nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century intermarriage tropes. Unlike earlier stories, these narratives position the white partner as the “other” and serve as useful frameworks for assessing ethnic and American identity.

Lately, you can find Lauren poring over old issues of *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* in her office, looking for articles of clothing referenced in twentieth-century American literature: her next book project is an investigation of the ways in which different eras of fashion have represented democratic ideals in America. She says this about the origin of American fashion as a cultural institution: “It emerged as something carefully derived but also separate from European fashion because of the American industry’s interest in connecting fashion with consumerism (with manufacturing, with technology, with journalism, etc.). When Condé Nast bought *Vogue* in 1909, one of the first things the magazine started doing was making dress patterns of Parisian couture dresses available to people in rural areas—there’s an ideological front to American fashion as a more democratic, more accessible form of dress. It maintains that you don’t have to be a millionaire in order to be fashionable.” Ever interested in American identity politics, Lauren aims to explore how twentieth-century writers portrayed their characters as engaged with fashion in a way that enabled them to strategize their social mobility. ♦



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Bailes - Cont. from page 1

This unique dissertation has expanded to a book project that Bailes is currently working on, entitled *Questioning Nature: Natural History and British Women Writers, 1730-1830*. Prior to our conversation I had read one of her articles, "The Evolution of the Plagiarist: Natural History in Anna Seward's Order of Poetics," in which she reevaluates Anna Seward's condemnation of Charlotte Smith's poetry. She sees Seward's literary criticism as rooted in her belief in species fixity. Seward's concern with creating a poetic hierarchy is indebted to the classification systems of the natural sciences. Bailes asserts that "we need the science in order to understand" the literature—a change of thought from previous criticism of these authors and texts.

Bailes's book examines the works of female authors such as Eliza Haywood, Anna Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Shelley to name a few. She loosely follows a trajectory that connects this literature with botany, then zoology, then geology, a sequence that mirrors the chronology in which these sciences gained popularity during the 18th century. In addition to her book project, Professor Bailes is enjoying her first year teaching at Tulane ("the faculty and students are fantastic!") and living in New Orleans. She thoughtfully remarked that this city is a "great place to think about the environment" and that she's looking forward to her first Mardi Gras!

## The Poetry Exchange Project Symposium

On November 30 and December 1, students, poets, and interested public gathered on Tulane's campus and at various locations across New Orleans for the Poetry Exchange Project Symposium. A full day of student presentations, panel discussions, and a city-wide student reading ended with readings by six visiting poets and fourteen local poets. The event was the culmination of the English Department's Contemporary Poetry Honors Colloquium, taught by Andy Stallings, a poet and instructor at Tulane.

**Carolyn Ruocco and Sally Beauvais**, students in Stallings's Honors Colloquium, had a conversation about their experiences following the Symposium:

**Carolyn:** Even in the English Department world, I get the impression that contemporary poetry often goes unnoticed. As an English major, it never occurred to me until taking this class with Andy Stallings that there are actually still poets who write, teach, and critique. We spent a lot of time in our class discussing the depressing fact that the names Kiki Petrosino, Daniel Khalastchi, and Michelle Taransky aren't on best-seller lists or in prominent book review publications. The buildup to this symposium for me, therefore, was huge. After exchanging insightful conversation and poems with my writing partner from Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania, I had begun to understand what the larger community of poets is like. Poets

work together, support each other, and respect each other's work. After almost a whole semester of falling in love with these poets and all the potential that contemporary poetry has to nurture and improve our culture, the Poetry Symposium brought many of them together to celebrate and share ideas, advice, and of course, poetry.

**Sally:** Yes, I think the interactive nature of the symposium was what made it a valuable experience for me. But I'd had the opposite experience approaching this event—as a creative writing student, I've had a lot of exposure to contemporary literature in my workshop classes (particularly poetry). So, given this experience, I'd fallen into the fear that these communities of published contemporary poets were small and impenetrable, which, ultimately, is a ridiculous anxiety. The symposium was great for that reason. I was thrilled to meet and talk with the poets whose work I've studied over the last several years, but I was also happy to hear great work from fellow poets at UNO and Lusher at the student reading. The poetry community in New Orleans expanded for me over that hour and a half.

**Carolyn:** What you said about poetry communities as impenetrable is definitely something that the Poetry Symposium challenged with its community panel and the diverse group of students who read their work. While on one hand I felt intimidated presenting my project in front of published poets, I also felt that the poets were genuinely interested in the work that the students presented. Our Contemporary Poetry Colloquium class was dedicated this semester to figuring out the many facets of our culture that

poetry can fall into, and the work that we all presented really shows the potential poetry has to help facilitate meaningful discussions about society as a whole. Many of our classmates' presentations talked about violence in our society and poetry's ability to expose its complex and subtle nuances in order to spark important conversations. Similarly, the community panel in the afternoon included poets who live and work in New Orleans to bring writers and non-writers together to strengthen the community.

**Sally:** That effort to expand the poetry community, to make it available to everyone by means of an open entryway seems pertinent to one of our main points of discussion in Andy's class: What do we do about the inaccessibility of contemporary poetry? Is it a problem that concerns the poetry itself (contemporary poetry being a genre that tends to favor abstraction over linear narrative, to want to complicate rather than define)? Or is it a problem concerning the approach to contemporary poetry (what we think we are meant to 'take' from a poem, what kinds of societal/institutional obstacles make 'difficult' poetry a more challenging thing to enjoy for some than others)? There was debate among the different poets who visited during the symposium regarding this topic, and I was glad to hear it. This affirmed for me that today's culture of poetry is not always one of blind agreement. Rather, at the symposium we engaged in a complex and thoughtful disagreement over what contemporary poetry has to do with the rest of the world. ♦

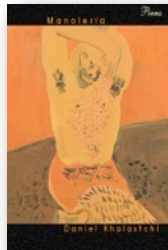
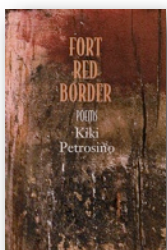
# events

Feb

4 - Carolyn  
Hembree  
Poetry Reading

18 - A.S. Byatt  
Great Writers Series

28 - Jericho Brown  
Poetry Reading



## faculty in action

To see the rest of our faculty's newest books, papers,  
articles, panels, awards, and achievements,  
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## Boyette Prize Winners

Fall 2012

Mysia Dye

"Bioterrorism: Are We Really Safe?"

Scott Spiegel

"From White Picket Signs to 140 Characters"

Spring 2012

Ashley Richardson

"High Heels: Are They Worth It?"

Dayton Hunn

"Democracy's Dilemma"

## Chair's News

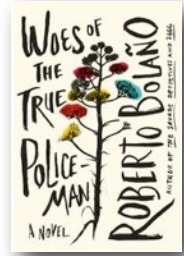
This semester marks the beginning of my second term as chair of the Tulane English Department. (I first served as department chair between 2000 and 2003.) I want to begin by saying what a privilege it is to be able to work with my department colleagues, SLA Dean Carole Haber, and Provost Michael Bernstein in advancing the strategic initiatives of Tulane by way of the writing, research, and teaching of literature and literary theory.

The special value of the study of literature impressed itself on me this past November, when I had the honor to meet one of America's and Louisiana's greatest writers and citizens, Ernest Gaines. Mr. Gaines was on the Tulane campus to speak with high school students about his life in writing: how, for instance, someone of humble origins becomes a respected author; how such an author imagines and composes a book like *A Lesson before Dying*; how a book like this, a modern classic, entertains and also speaks deeply about what its author hates and what he loves: the horror of racism, the beauty of the human spirit in triumphing over that horror.

Mr. Gaines was visiting Tulane in connection with *The Big Read*, a program for high school students and teachers funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. *The Big Read*, sponsored in New Orleans by the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society along with several local individuals and groups, including the Tulane English Department,

## Winter Break Reading Suggestions by Faculty & Students

- **Melissa Bailes:** *The Age of Wonder* by Richard Holmes
- **Molly Rothenberg:** *The Purchase* by Linda Spalding
- **Richard Godden:** *The City and the City* by China Mieville
- **Catherine Michna:** *The Not Yet* by Moira Crone
- **Daniel Sanchez:** *Dear Life* by Alice Munro
- **Engram Wilkinson (student):** *Woes of the True Policeman* by Roberto Bolano
- **David Ewens (student):** *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card



is a model of university and community cooperation in advancing the humanities. Everywhere one looked and listened in Dixon Hall that morning, the splendid virtues of creating and studying great



literature were apparent: in the diversity of the audience, for example, and in the wonderful give and take between Mr. Gaines and an auditorium full of his young admirers.

One of Ernest Gaines's anecdotes was especially moving. He spoke of how, while living in California, where his parents had moved from his native Louisiana, he would look from his home in San Francisco across the bay to San Quentin Prison. There, he knew, on certain days of the week, people were being executed. On those days, he walked nearly five miles just to stare at the Pacific Ocean. Gazing at the sea restored his sense of calm and reconnected him with his humanity. A

few years later, reading and writing began to serve in his life the same, redemptive purpose.

Literature has the power to connect us to each other and to ourselves. You'll find that belief, I think, represented throughout the Tulane English Department—by our faculty, including our new Pierce Butler Professor, Ed White, a specialist in early American literature; by our courses and our students; and by our visitors, such as the superb British novelist, A. S. Byatt, who will be visiting with us in February; and the internationally known collector and scholar of the Victorians, Mark Samuels Lasner, who will deliver the annual Josephine Gessner Ferguson Lecture this April.

I hope you'll take the opportunity, through these events and people, to explore the Tulane English Department in 2013 and to experience by way of our department the transformative power of great writing and reading.

A heartfelt welcome to all of you!

Michael Kuczynski, Chair

### Our thanks to:

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