

# Letters & Science





The Southern African Large Telescope (SALT) is the largest single optical telescope in the southern hemisphere. UW-Madison faculty, staff and student scientists use this giant eye in the southern sky to unravel how galaxies are born.

PHOTO: JEFF MILLER

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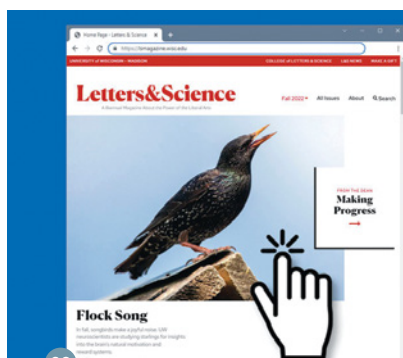
BY AARON R. CONKLIN



Professor of English Beth Nguyen leads a Creative Writing Program on the rise.

PHOTO: BRYCE RICHTER

# #WeAreLS



Have you visited the brand-new website we've created for our biannual alumni magazine? Lots of new features coming with the debut of the Spring 2023 issue in a few weeks – video content, alumni notes and more.

[@UWMadisonLS](#) April 14, 2023



Our highlights from Winter Carnival, a @wisconsinunion tradition! Enjoy! And shoutout to our new L&S photography intern, Crystal Kim, for capturing these moments. We can't wait to share more of her work with the L&S community.

[@UWMadisonLS](#) February 12, 2023



Yep, that was UW-Madison Department of History alum Walter Mirisch ('42) in the coveted final spot of the memorial montage during tonight's Oscars ceremony. Mirisch, who died at the age of 101 in late February, was a legendary Hollywood film producer and former president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

[@UWMadisonLS](#) March 12, 2023



Hacky sack on a Saturday and other sights our L&S intern, Crystal Kim, captured while on a weekend stroll around campus.

[@UWMadisonLS](#) March 6, 2023

## Letters & Science

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FROM THE DEAN

# Advances in Research



**What are the keys to driving discovery?** Research. Innovation. Creativity. At the College of Letters & Science, we are leveraging the enormous talent of our faculty and staff to expand our research enterprise and to deepen our local, national and global impact. I am extremely proud that our faculty, staff and students are so deeply committed to using research to address the most challenging issues facing our planet and our communities.

While we excel as an R1 research institution, we recognize that we must be responsive to the changing landscape of funding sources that rewards collaboration across disciplines and partnerships between academia, industry and community organizations. L&S is meeting that challenge by increasing the number of applications for centers and institutes and other large grants, improving industry connections and collaborating with campus on potential tech-hub proposals.

This issue of *Letters & Science* highlights some of the exciting research taking place within the College. We showcase the work of the Wisconsin Center for Origins Research (WiCOR), a new multidisciplinary center of faculty and researchers from seven departments that is poised to explore the origins of life in the universe. WiCOR, funded in part by the Department of Astronomy's Board of Visitors, was born out of a strategic hiring initiative to link together faculty colleagues and develop new research synergies.

You'll also learn about the research of Ruby Bafu, a sociology graduate student whose work is supported by a three-year National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship. Bafu studies the phenomenon of race, gender and education from multiple angles, looking

for ways to address some of the issues that Black girls face while uplifting who they are. You'll read about the success of our wildly popular Creative Writing Program, one of the only such initiatives nationwide to teach writing at the undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate levels. We introduce you to Bradinn French '08, an L.A. film editor whose work includes several highly acclaimed documentaries and series. And in our cover story, you will learn that as the world races to understand more about the potential of quantum computing, L&S physicists are advancing the science that will power the computers of the future.

Of course, our innovation and creativity would not be possible without philanthropic support from our alumni and friends. From the investment of the Astronomy Board of Visitors to help establish WiCOR, to graduate fellowships and named professorships that allow us to recruit and retain amazing faculty, philanthropy has always been key to advancing the research mission of the College. The stories in this edition of our magazine highlight just some of the groundbreaking research going on in L&S. Philanthropy can help push these projects further and ensure that we remain on the cutting edge of discovery.

Thank you for your continued support of the College of Letters & Science. It is essential to help us strengthen our research in every discipline and to pursue the discoveries and innovations that push our mission *forward*.

**Eric M. Wilcots**

Dean and Mary C. Jacoby Professor of Astronomy,  
College of Letters & Science

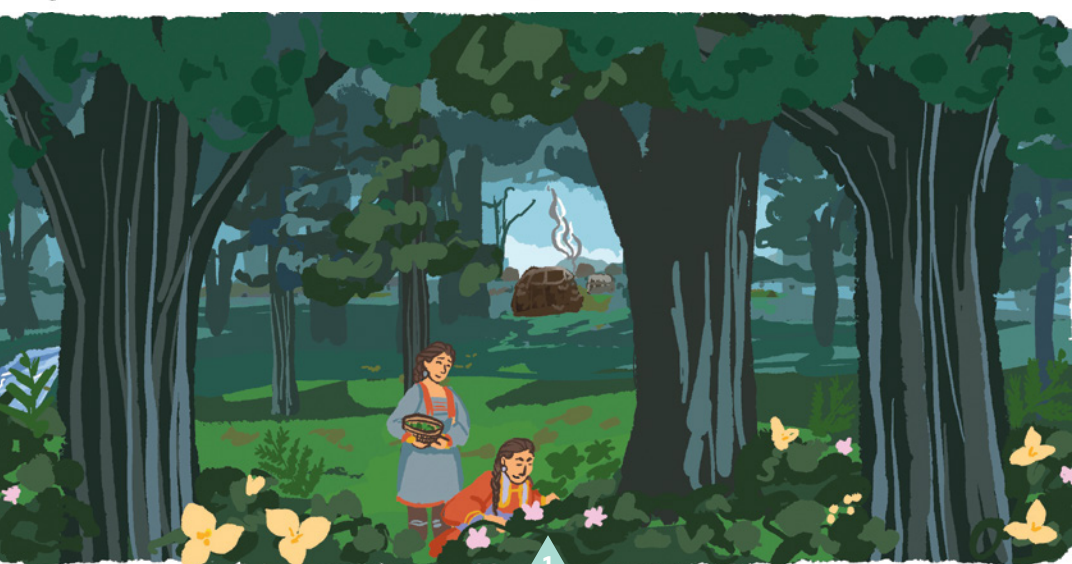
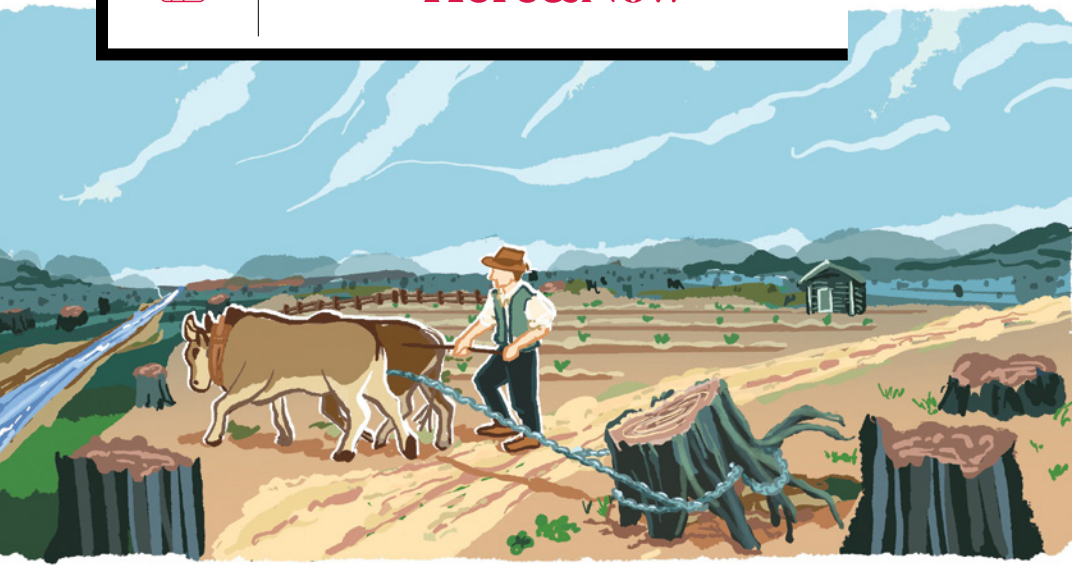


ILLUSTRATIONS: LIZ ANNA KOZIK

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## The Big 3-5

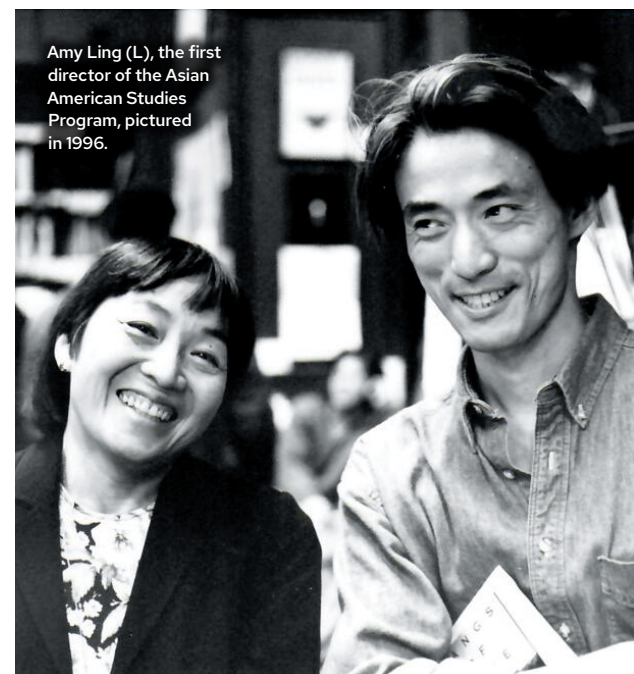
**In mid-April**, in conjunction with Asian, Pacific Islander and Desi American (APIDA) Heritage Month, the college's Asian American studies program held a celebration to mark its 35th anniversary at the Red Gym, the home of the recently created APIDA Student Center. Sparked by APIDA-related material that appeared in last fall's Sifting and Reckoning public history project, Lori Kido Lopez, professor of communication arts and director of the Asian American studies program, created a team that scoured campus and departmental archives for stories and artifacts of the program's history, combining those documents with interviews to create a robust oral history. UW-Madison's Asian American studies program was the first one established in the Midwest. Spurred by student protests in 1988 over a racially insensitive annual fraternity event, a group of APIDA students known as the Asian Coalition petitioned UW to form a department. Amy Ling, the programs' first director, was hired in 1991. "Each program has its own stories to tell, and it's good for us to organize this and make sure it's safely given to the archives," says Lopez.



## Understanding Wisconsin's Land-Grant History

**For the past several years**, UW-Madison has made it a practice to acknowledge, at events and meetings, that the land on which the university sits was expropriated from the Ho-Chunk people when the university was founded 175 years ago. Backed by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, a group of five L&S professors is developing a set of educational modules designed to teach students a deeper awareness of indigenous land dispossession across the state of Wisconsin. "There is a huge disconnect if you don't know American Indian history, you don't know the tribal nations of the state and you don't know how treaties worked," says Kasey Keeler, an assistant professor of American Indian studies. "But when you can kind of connect the dots, I think it's really, really powerful. And I think this project can do that." In addition to Keeler, the project includes Jen Rose-Smith, an assistant professor of geography, Ruth Goldstein, a professor of gender and women's studies, Joe Mason, a professor of geography, and Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, a professor of English.

Artistic panels created by artist Liz Anna Kozik illustrate Wisconsin life in 1800 and 1880.



Amy Ling (L), the first director of the Asian American Studies Program, pictured in 1996.



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## Continuing the Discussion

**Sifting and Reckoning**, the public history project that examined some of the more troublesome aspects of UW–Madison’s history through a well-received installation last fall at the Chazen Museum of Art, will continue as the Rebecca M. Blank Center for Campus History. The Center’s leadership team has turned its attention to creating education materials designed to be used by faculty across the campus to spark difficult discussions about racism, diversity and inclusion. Several L&S faculty members, including Christa Olson,

the chair of the Department of English, and Christy Clark-Pujara, an associate professor of history and African American studies, have deployed them in class with their students. “A few of my students who visited the exhibit last fall mentioned how much it changed the conversation they had with their parents and grandparents,” says Clark-Pujara. “We have a lot of third- and fourth-generation Badgers, and their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were here at some of these moments of pivotal change and contestation.”

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The College of Letters & Science is home to three of the top five fastest-growing undergraduate majors at UW–Madison, based on the number of students declaring between 2018 and fall 2022. The new data science major and computer sciences landed at one and two, respectively, while psychology came in fourth.



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## Building the Future

**Progress continues** for two critical new buildings set to transform the landscape of the College of Letters & Science. Groundbreaking occurred in late April for the new building that will house the School of Computer, Data & Information Sciences (CDIS). The 328,000-square-foot tower is located on University Avenue, up the street from the new Chemistry Tower, and is expected to provide interactive and lab space for the growing number of students majoring in computer sciences, information sciences, data science and statistics. CDIS’ new home is expected to open in 2025.

Meanwhile, the new Irving and Dorothy Levy Hall, a five-story academic building designed to replace the 1960s-era Humanities Building, is moving through the architectural design phase. Levy Hall, which will sit at the corner of Park Street and West Johnson Street, will house eight Letters & Science academic departments and programs along with new student classrooms and interactive spaces. The building is on track for a 2026 opening.



Rendering of CDIS Building




Rendering of Irving and Dorothy Levy Hall



**What does it feel like to be treated like a problem?**





Graduate student Ruby Bafu searches for educational spaces that support Black girls.

BY AARON R. CONKLIN

**A**lthough Black girlhood can be beautiful, it's often not easy being a Black girl in school. Black girls deal with cultural and media stereotypes that paint them as loud, disruptive and problematic in the classroom. They also deal with a phenomenon called adultification, a term that refers to the perception that Black girls are less innocent, are in need of less nurturing, and are more adult-like than white girls of the same age. Research shows that Black girls are often disproportionately punished by their teachers for subjective infractions such as disobedience or defiance.

"I think it has a lot to do with the normative messages and images that we have just decided to apply to Black girls that shape a lot of how we view and think about them and treat them," says Ruby Bafu, a native of Long Island, New York, and a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology. "What we find is that what they're experiencing is different than students from other communities."

Bafu has been studying the phenomenon of race, gender and education from multiple angles, looking for ways to address some of the issues that Black girls face while uplifting who they are. In 2020, she was selected to receive a three-year National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship to examine the influence of school punishment practices on Black girls' understanding of themselves as part of her master's thesis project. But the COVID pandemic, which shut down in-person schools, became an obstacle.

Bafu quickly pivoted to look at how the media, particularly news articles, frame Black girls and how Black women are documented as supporting Black girls' educational experiences. For her dissertation project, Bafu is examining student engagement in online educational spaces. She has made some important discoveries about how certain types of

online spaces create supportive learning environments for Black female students.

Bafu began her preliminary dissertation work at a small, micro-school that serves only girls of color, mainly Black girls. This small, hybrid, online school is embedded in a midwestern school district and met online three weeks and in person for one week each month during the time Bafu studied it. She quickly noticed that students who might not otherwise feel comfortable participating in a crowded in-person classroom were encouraged to turn on their cameras and speak up. Teachers were present and available to help them with questions on difficult subjects, including within online breakout rooms outside of normal classroom hours. In short, the students became part of a learning community that encouraged them and taught them key skills.

Punishment, meanwhile, was scarcely an issue in the smaller online environment, as teachers were able to engage and support the students individually and address issues in real time.

"Instead of sending someone away to detention, it's now just a conversation in the middle of class because they have the time and space for that, given the structure of the program," says Bafu. "I think that really allowed for an environment that was more about building necessary skills in situations where you might [otherwise] see punitive punishment practices."

Bafu is excited by the possibilities offered by online learning communities — including the potential to eliminate some of the adversities that are often part of a typical public school environment. Online micro-schools don't have school resource or police officers, for instance, and it is easier to spot bullying when it's occurring via an online learning platform.

Whether or not online learning opportunities continue to grow, Bafu plans to continue studying educational spaces and school discipline because of how these issues impact Black girls and other historically marginalized groups.

"What does it feel like to be a problem?" she asks. "That's something that I would encourage folks who aren't Black girls to really ponder, from an intersectional lens. What would it be like for you to go through school and know that those who should be supporting you and cheering you on inherently view you as a problem that needs fixing?" ■



## FACULTY

# I Spy

Rahul Chatterjee and his team have created a clinic to help victims of domestic abuse whose attackers may be using technology to stalk them.

BY AARON R. CONKLIN

**T**echnology can be a wonderful thing. The GPS tech in our smartphones can effortlessly direct us to almost any location. Password managing software helps lessen the frustration of remembering a bazillion different eight-character inputs.

But the same technology that keeps our luggage from being misplaced at the airport and helps us keep track of our wayward children can also be used for nefarious and even deadly purposes, especially in situations that involve stalkers and what's known as intimate partner violence (IPV). And in some cases, the victim may have little to no idea that this seemingly innocuous technology is being used to stalk, control and potentially harm them.

Technology's troubling relationship to IPV was something Rahul Chatterjee, an assistant professor of computer sciences with the School of Computer, Data & Information Sciences (CDIS), first discovered as a graduate student at Cornell University.

"In security research, we assume attackers and hackers are everywhere," says Chatterjee. "But we also assume that they don't know the victim personally. With intimate partner violence, that very basic assumption is broken. And, therefore,



Rahul Chatterjee makes a point of teaching his students about threat modeling, the concept of mapping out how software systems can be broken — and who might break them.

all the security mechanisms that we have built in the last 30 years are ineffective.”

The Centers for Disease Control estimate that one in every four women experiences IPV, with numbers trending even higher in the Black and transgender communities. And many of those cases involve abuse of technology.

At Cornell, Chatterjee and his colleagues began digging into mobile spyware, or stalkerware as it’s also known. Some of the problems were obvious — phone-tracking mobile applications like mSpy and FlexiSPY that can do everything from raiding call logs to taking photos and recording audio of the user. But others were far more subtle. Google Maps, for instance, includes a location tracking feature, as does the app Find My iPhone.

“Those applications are at least on the face of it designed for some legitimate use, but they can easily be abused to spy on and stalk victims,” says Chatterjee. “Most of these applications don’t have any protection from being used against an intimate partner.”

In response to his findings, Chatterjee helped create a tech clinic at Cornell, a resource that victims of IPV could access to learn more about spyware and how to safely disable or remove it without alerting their stalker. He’s recreated the model at UW-Madison, setting up a tech clinic ([techclinic.cs.wisc.edu](http://techclinic.cs.wisc.edu)) to help victims in the Madison area.

The clinic website is not yet intended for public use, says Chatterjee. Clients who wish to access the clinic’s services must first contact and work with Madison-based Domestic Abuse Intervention Services (DAIS) or one of several other organizations with whom Chatterjee’s group has partnered.

Currently, Chatterjee’s clinic is staffed by students, many of whom are volunteering their time to help victims. The students are experts in technology and are trained in trauma-informed care, but they are not experienced in managing the tricky nuances of an abusive

**“In security research, we assume attackers and hackers... don’t know the victim personally. With intimate partner violence, that very basic assumption is broken.”**

RAHUL CHATTERJEE

relationship, which is why the clinic relies on DAIS and its other partners to help provide effective advice to those who need it. Clients of the clinic are required to be in the room with the clinic volunteers and an advocate to avoid potentially volatile situations.

Creating awareness is typically the first goal — in many cases, the victims only suspect the use of spyware, possibly because an abuser showed up unexpectedly at a restaurant or workplace or discussed information that could only have been gleaned from a smartphone. If Chatterjee’s team does find spyware or a potentially suspicious setting on a phone, they will show the victim how to mitigate the concern by, for example, removing or disabling the offending software or helping them change their passwords to something their stalker is unlikely to know or guess. In some cases, Chatterjee’s team won’t change anything or leave any traces that the phone has been scanned, giving the victim a modicum of plausible deniability.

“Some of these situations can be seriously risky,” says Chatterjee. “In some cases, if they change the password, the abuser will discover it and it can escalate the violence. We have to be cautious, and, therefore, we always inform clients about the risks.”

In the classes he teaches at UW-Madison, Chatterjee often discusses the concept of threat modeling, the understanding of how software systems can be broken — and who might be able to break them. The hacker in question might be in a faraway land. Or they might be in the same house with you.

“I have a small hope that the people who are graduating from my classes will at least think twice before they create a ‘feature’ on their side system,” says Chatterjee. “They will step back and ask themselves first, ‘Can this feature be abused or used to take advantage of certain vulnerable populations?’” ■



PHOTO: W. BRETT MATTINGLY

This is an example of a healthier longleaf pine understory dominated by wiregrass. The tree trunks show evidence of previous wildfires, which are an important part of a healthy longleaf pine ecosystem.

RESEARCH

## Taking the Long View

Long-term restoration of a biodiversity hotspot hinges on getting seeds to the right place at the right time.

BY WILL CUSHMAN

**I**n the race to restore some of North America's most biodiverse and threatened ecosystems, a straightforward first step is likely among the most important.

New research by a team of scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Michigan State University shows that degraded savanna ecosystems can reap lasting benefits from a single seeding of native understory plants. The study underscores the long-term value of even a brief burst of targeted land management in efforts to restore fallow agricultural fields and other landscapes scarred by human activity.

The eight-year experiment centered on three large tracts of federal land within the historical range of the longleaf pine savanna ecosystem. This biodiversity hotspot once spanned some 90 million acres but has largely vanished. Less than five percent of the continent's longleaf pine savanna remains, and much of what does persist is a shadow of the unspoiled ecosystem of the past.

"In a high-quality longleaf stand, you can find more than 30 species in a square meter. It's incredible," says John Orrock, Wayland E. Noland Distinguished Chair in Integrative Biology. Orrock and Ellen Damschen, Mary Herman Rubinstein Professor of Integrative Biology, were part of the team that led the study.

After assessing more than 230 sites, the team selected 48 meeting criteria that allowed them to gauge whether

factors like the space between trees would measurably affect whether native understory plants could establish or persist.

The researchers planted the sites with seeds from about two dozen species of native non-woody plants collected locally, including purple milkweed and sweet goldenrod. They returned periodically to document how successful each species was in becoming established and, crucially, how well they persisted.

They found that factors like needle depth, tree spacing, and seasonal temperature and precipitation did have some influence on the initial success of seeding. Cooler and wetter conditions promoted better establishment, as did shallower needle depth and more space between trees. These latter conditions reflect the ecosystem's natural state of periodic low-intensity wildfires that consume leaf litter and saplings.

Once a diverse understory of savanna plants became established, its long-term persistence was relatively unaffected by environmental factors—with one exception. Higher temperatures during the height of the growing season were associated with poorer long-term survival among some species, indicating one threat posed by a warming climate.

The study also demonstrates that a single addition of native seeds can have clear benefits that last for years. The researchers are optimistic that their results can help land managers direct limited resources toward restoration strategies with the greatest chance of success.

While the results are most applicable in the context of the longleaf pine savanna ecosystem, they could prove useful for management of similar ecosystems, such as the oak savanna that once dominated large swaths of Wisconsin and the Midwest.

"I see a lot of parallels in the work that we do both here in Wisconsin in tallgrass prairie and oak savanna and longleaf pine savanna in the southeast," says Damschen. ■



PHOTO: SOO JUNG KIM



## TEACHING

# Dedicated to the Digital

Debra Pierce, distinguished teaching faculty in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication, has taught at UW for 17 years and has become somewhat of an expert in online teaching and learning. Her online summer class, Media Fluency in the Digital Age, has been popular among undergraduate students in the digital studies certificate program for almost a decade. Last fall, Pierce partnered with the L&S Instructional Design Collaborative (IDC) to refresh the course. A spring “test run” of the rebuilt class received great student reviews.

INTERVIEW BY MASON BRAASCH

**I** created the original version of the Media Fluency course with the help of instructional designer Jonathan Klein about 10 years ago, when UW–Madison implemented a strategic initiative to expand our summer course offerings. Since then, hundreds of students have taken my class, and summer semester enrollment for the College has grown tremendously.

**Jonathan is now the Director** of the IDC, and we both thought it’d be fun to take a crack at overhauling the course structure, rhythm, and graphical interface for today’s digital learners. The IDC is a team of instructional designers and video and graphic content creators who collaborate with instructors in L&S to create new classes or enhance existing ones. For example, they can help with innovative new homework exercises or technologies to make L&S classes even better.

**Teaching in the digital space** requires instructors like me to stay current with ever-changing media and topics, so I have always refreshed the class content each time I’ve taught it. But I hadn’t touched underlying class

structure. One of the biggest things that the IDC folks and I did in partnering together was to reimagine the structure of how we are delivering the class to make sure we’re meeting the needs of today’s more sophisticated online learners. The IDC team created frameworks to help me re-think the course design and develop a new course rhythm.

**One of the most important** aspects of online instruction is to ensure you’re building what’s called “instructor presence.” My goal – even though we’re not in a face-to-face class – is for students to feel that we have built as much of a relationship and classroom culture online as possible. While I feel the prior version of the class did that, the instructional designers at IDC worked with me to take that to a higher level.

**For example,** you won’t find any online lectures in either of the two online classes I’ve developed, and that’s for a reason – because it’s hard for students to sit there and listen to a 25-minute videotaped lecture. They learn better through organized content, whether that’s delivered through the web pages within Canvas [the online learning system used at UW], video snippets that are maybe two to no more than five minutes long, interacting with each other, or other graphic elements.

**It’s very easy** for instructors to get into a rhythm with our existing classes. And while we always take time to enhance them for each new semester, this experience really forced me to completely step back from the class and reevaluate it, tear it apart and rebuild it from the bottom up. I can take all of that and apply it back to not just my online classes but to my face-to-face classes, as well.

**This whole opportunity** to create a new version of this class was a great experience. We were able to learn from each other and take something that we thought was already good and make it even better. I’m proud of that. ■

CULTURE

## Under the Gun

Nick Buttrick studies one of America's most unusual psychologies.

BY AARON R. CONKLIN

**C**onsider the following: According to the Pew Research Group, 40 percent of Americans live in a house with a gun, and 30 percent of Americans own one.

There are 393 million civilian-owned guns in the United States, a number large enough that every single individual could have one, with several thousand left to spare.

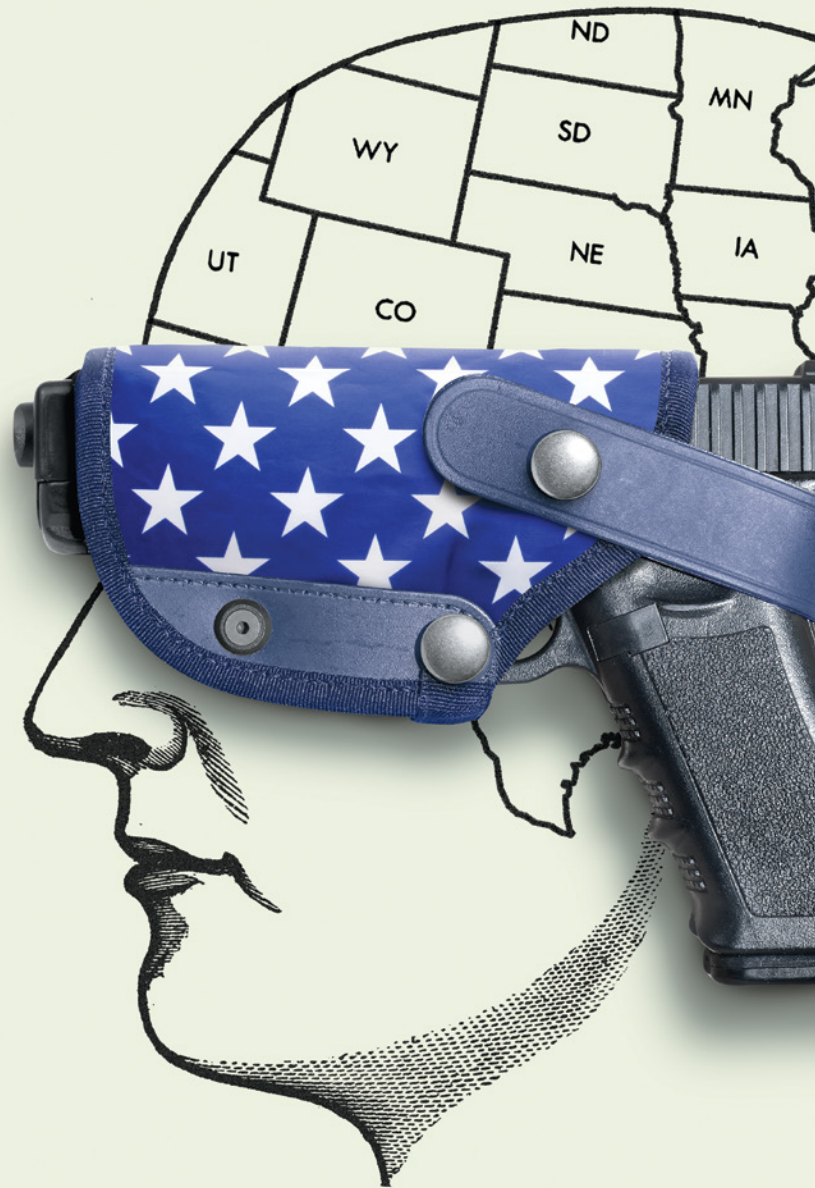
"The fact that we have all these weapons around — nowhere else in the world looks anything like us," says Buttrick, an assistant professor of psychology. "And you have to explain that somehow. You can't understand what it means to have an American psychology without grappling with that as a core feature."

Buttrick has made it his mission to examine the psychology of gun ownership in America, a problematic and politically fraught topic to say the least. But in a country in which a six-year-old in Virginia brought a gun to class and shot his teacher — and it's not even the most shocking gun-related incident to occur in 2023 — the pursuit seems not just interesting, but essential.

"We're very good at telling stories about why the things that we're doing are right, normal and just," says Buttrick. "And the fact that the United States has been the only place that has this level of gun ownership implies that there are a lot of people with this incredibly dangerous object in their lives, and they're still able to tell themselves the same story that everyone tells themselves: that their

lives are right, just, good, not unusual and safe."

Buttrick grew up in New York, a part of the country that didn't sport a particularly strong gun culture — an origin story that has occasionally made the interviews he's conducted with gun owners and members of gun clubs challenging. As a social psychologist, Buttrick is fascinated by the ways in which individuals construct





**“The fact that we have all these weapons around – nowhere else in the world looks anything like us. And you have to explain that somehow.”**

NICK BUTTRICK

“Being able to look at the older American style of gun ownership built around hunting and sport – as opposed to this newer style of ownership – which is much more about protection from evil, being able to sort of disentangle that is a really fascinating aspect that I’m looking to push my research toward,” Buttrick says.

Buttrick’s most recent research project suggested that America’s deep obsession with gun ownership may have crystallized in the post-Civil War era, when former slaveowners began using them to protect their way of life. Buttrick found that counties with the highest levels of enslavement in the late 1860s are also the ones with the highest levels of gun ownership today and are the ones where guns and protection are most tightly linked.

Buttrick also finds himself particularly fascinated with the circular psychology that seems to underpin gun ownership. In order for a gun to feel useful, he argues, an individual has to believe two things: that the world is dangerous, and that society is unwilling or unable to offer protection. But once you have a gun, individuals exhibit a tendency to see the

world as a more dangerous place – and, as the political discourse of the last few decades has shown, it also leads to sharp arguments over whether the government or interest groups might try to take it away or regulate it.

“If you think this is the only thing that’s keeping you safe, the only thing that’s keeping you valued, well, of course, you don’t want to give it up,” says Buttrick. “Finding ways of exploring that tension is one place where some of this work can be meaningful.”

And there’s another. With horrific mass shootings in America remaining a routine part of news headlines – including a recent attack that took place on the Michigan State University campus, taking the lives of three undergraduate students – Buttrick and his lab have also turned their attention to the impact of such shootings on local communities.

“How do people respond to these sorts of tragedies?” he asks. “Is it different from other sorts of tragedies that take people away, like car accidents? That’s something we need to explore.” ■

worldviews to help them navigate their daily lives. Psychologists argue that an individual’s three most fundamental needs are feeling safe, feeling in control and belonging to meaningful communities. For many Americans, gun ownership checks all three.

Studying this issue in Wisconsin, one of the states that maintains a deep and active hunting culture, has provided an interesting contrast for his research.

STUDENTS

## Catching Up with Claire

Eight months into her yearlong fellowship, Wolff Fellow Claire James shares her experiences abroad.

BY MASON BRAASCH

**S**ince graduating last spring, Claire James has climbed Mt. Fuji in Japan, wakeboarded on the Han River in South Korea, and learned how to say “hello” in three new languages. She has also worked with international organizations to assist in English language programs and microfinance initiatives.

As the inaugural recipient of the Wolff Fellowship, created by the generosity of Paul Martin Wolff ('63) and Rhea S. Schwartz, James was given \$45,000 and granted the opportunity to create her ideal year of traveling internationally, pursuing her passions without financial burdens. Eight months into her year of travel, James says the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity has been astonishing.

“It is incredible to me how much life can be lived in a couple hundred days,” James says. “I could spend hours telling you about the amazing food I’ve eaten, the places I’ve seen, the people I’ve met.”

James graduated with degrees in international studies and economics, with certificates in European studies and French. This year, she is using the opportunity to apply what she learned in the classroom to the real world, traveling to five countries and exploring organizations with a message that aligns with her aspirations.

Starting her journey in June, James traveled to Nagasaki, Japan, where she worked alongside other interns from Wisconsin and Minnesota at the Guy Healy English Language Summer Camps. She then traveled to Seoul, South Korea, to volunteer at the International University Exchange Center, which supports Korean students preparing to study abroad in Wisconsin through language and culture classes. James is currently in Lilongwe, Malawi, interning at ACADES, a microfinance organization that provides business, input and irrigation loans to groups of youth and female farmers.

“I remember I first heard about microfinance and village savings and loan associations in an econ class as a sophomore at UW, and I was really interested, but those don’t exist in Madison,” says James. “In Malawi, I’ve been able to tangibly see applied economics – applying the theories, the principles and the practices that I’ve learned about in the classroom to real life, real places, real people.”

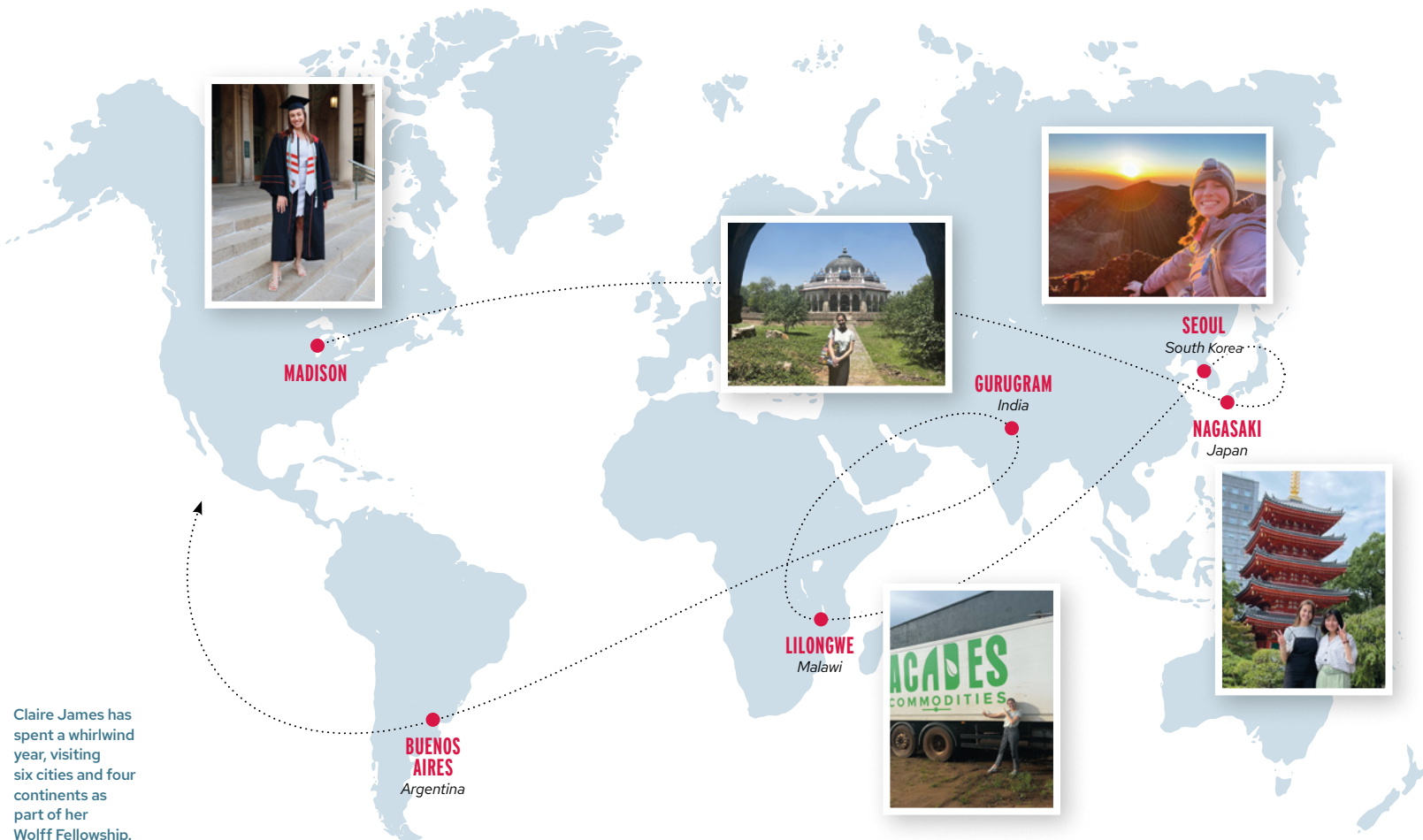
In the coming months, James will also travel to Gurugram, India, and Buenos Aires, Argentina, where she will work to strengthen community-led development initiatives and take immersive classes in Spanish.

In planning her year, James was intentional about the organizations that she would work with, making local leadership and ties to Wisconsin priorities.

“It was really important to me that the groups I worked with had individuals from those places who are also actively involved in the project,” she says. “I wanted to make sure that the projects I was contributing to were being spearheaded by people from those communities

PHOTO: COLTON MANSVANG





Claire James has spent a whirlwind year, visiting six cities and four continents as part of her Wolff Fellowship.

who live with those challenges and really know the ins and outs of how best to go about solving a problem.”

Outside of her work with these organizations, James has had the freedom to explore the countries she has visited. From safaris and cooking classes to host-family visits and sunrises on Mt. Fuji, James has made it her goal to make the most of her time abroad.

“I really am trying to make sure that I am appreciating these experiences, because I understand that this is not the norm,” she says. “Having the privilege to be able to travel and go to these places and receive the welcome that I have and the freedom to move around – it is not lost on me that this year is truly something to be so grateful for.”

Despite being able to experience many bucket-list destinations and activities, James says that the connections she has

**“It is incredible to me how much life can be lived in a couple hundred days. I could spend hours telling you about the amazing food I’ve eaten, the places I’ve seen, the people I’ve met.”**

CLAIRE JAMES

made in every country have been the most fulfilling part of her travels.

“I am constantly amazed – in every place I visit – how people are so willing to welcome you in,” she says. “After spending three days with a host family in Japan, we kept in touch over the summer months and shared meals and visited so many beautiful spots in their city. They even invited me to their great-aunt’s restaurant and made me an honored guest.”

Although James has four months (and two countries) left on her journey, she says that this experience has inspired her as she looks ahead to her future, which may include graduate school and work in economics and diplomacy.

“If this experience has taught me anything, it’s that I want to work internationally in the future,” she says. “I have loved meeting people and making connections and learning in an international setting.” ■



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Former UW-Madison provost and dean of the College of Letters & Science John Karl Scholz (R) will become the president of the University of Oregon on July 1st.

### Headed West

John Karl Scholz, who served as dean of the College of Letters & Science from 2013 to 2019, left his position as UW-Madison provost in April to become president of the University of Oregon. Scholz, an economist and former director of UW’s Institute for Research on Poverty, was a huge supporter of the liberal arts and was responsible for creating SuccessWorks, the College’s student career services initiative.

“We’ll miss him for all the ways that he has contributed over many years, including, above all, his warm presence and thoughtful leadership,” says UW-Madison Chancellor Jennifer Mnookin.

### Cave Story

Those who had the chance to visit the Cave of the Mounds, a limestone cave west of Madison in Blue Mounds, Wisc., likely remember it as an unforgettable site of natural subterranean beauty. Thanks to a study that involved former Department of Geoscience graduate student Cameron Batchelor, it’s also now an invaluable source of local climate history dating back thousands of years.

Batchelor’s team used a specialized imaging technique that allowed them to identify layers within one of the cave’s stalagmites. Those layers represented annual growth bands – much like how tree rings record a season’s worth

of growth. The team identified the isotopes in the tiny layers, revealing that present-day southern Wisconsin experienced several very large average temperature swings of up to 10° C (or about 18° F) between 48,000 and 68,000 years ago. Several of the

temperature swings occurred over the course of about a decade. The group’s findings belie the theory that the Midwest has been somehow buffered from abrupt changes in climate. “Something is definitely happening,” says Batchelor.



Stalagmites in Cave of the Mounds hold secrets about Wisconsin’s climate history.

## Elevating Latinx Art to New Heights

It's been a big year for art history alumna Marcela Guerrero (PhD '15). Guerrero's curated exhibition, *No existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, opened to critical acclaim. And the Museum also promoted her to the position of Demartini Family Curator. She's the first Latina to hold the position, which puts her in the perfect place to continue her work acquiring and promoting Latinx art. "It's about reframing how we tell the history of American art," Guerrero told *The New York Times*. "We assume a collective responsibility about widening our scope and addressing parts of our collection we've neglected."

## God Save the Queen

Talk about momentous timing: The Library Association of Alberta has awarded Information School alumna Toni Samek (PhD '98) the Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee Medal (Alberta), commemorating the 70th anniversary of Her Majesty's accession to the throne as Queen. Samek, a professor at the University of Alberta, was recognized for her "dedication to family, community and country," as well as for convening the Canadian Library Association's Advisory Committee on Intellectual Freedom.

## A Big Little Book

In the late 1970s, Joan Little captivated the world and changed the way the U.S. legal system viewed a woman's right to self-defense. The story of a 20-year-old Black prisoner who killed her white jailor, Clarence Allgood, and fled from a rural women's prison in North Carolina seemed straightforward, and Little appeared headed to the gas chamber for murder. At her trial, however, she claimed Allgood had raped her, and the case became a debate about whether a woman had the right to use deadly force to prevent sexual assault. Little was eventually acquitted.

Christina Greene, a professor of history, African American studies, and gender & women's studies, digs into the impact of Little's trial in her new book, *Free Joan Little: The Politics of Race, Sexual Violence & Imprisonment*. Greene, who has studied Little's situation for several decades, argues that Little was the victim not just of sexual assault but of decades of the federal government criminalizing Blackness. She also explores the uneasy relationships between the individuals and groups that defended Little.

## Harsh History

If you've caught the excellent Netflix documentary *Descendant* – and if you haven't, you really should – then you've already enjoyed the work of alumnus Kern M. Jackson (MA'91). Jackson



Christina Greene's latest book looks at the impact of the trial of a Black woman accused of killing the white jailor who assaulted her.

co-wrote and co-produced the story of the *Clotilda*, the ship that continued to transport slaves to the Alabama coastline for four decades after the practice had been outlawed in the United States. The film features interviews with the descendants of those slaves, many of whom now live in Africatown, an Alabama community outside of Mobile, where Jackson now directs the African American Studies Department at the University of South Alabama. (The *Clotilda* was burned and sunk to conceal its existence, but parts of the wreck were discovered in the Mobile River by divers in 2019.) Jackson, who had been curating survivors' stories for a local museum prior to making the film, has received critical acclaim for his work: *Descendant* won a special jury prize for creative vision at the 2022 Sundance Festival.



Professor of English **Elizabeth Bearden**, Vilas Distinguished Professor of Public Affairs **Jason Fletcher**, and Vilas Distinguished Professor of Geoscience **Stephen Meyers** were named as 2023 Guggenheim Fellows. Winners are selected for both their prior achievements and exceptional promise.



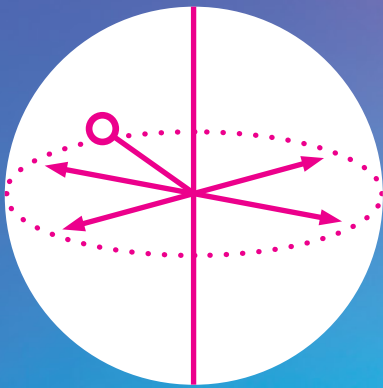
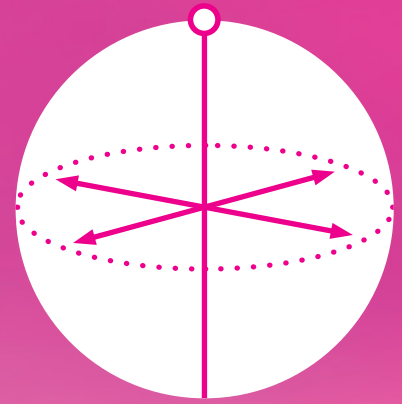
**Andrew Buller**, an assistant professor of chemistry, and **Jose Israel Rodriguez**, an assistant professor of mathematics, were chosen as 2023 Sloan Research Fellows. Each year, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation honors early-career researchers who display outstanding innovation and creativity.



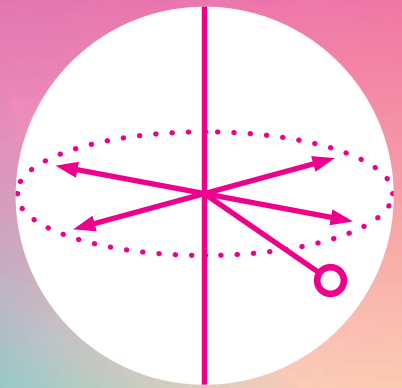
**Remzi Arpacı-Dusseau**, the Grace Wahba Professor and Chair of Computer Sciences, and **Kyoung-Shin Choi**, a professor of chemistry, were elected as fellows of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science, the world's largest general scientific society.

**Unlocking**

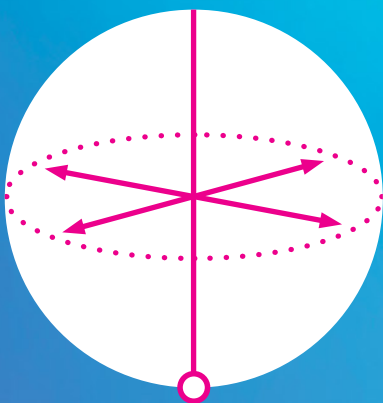
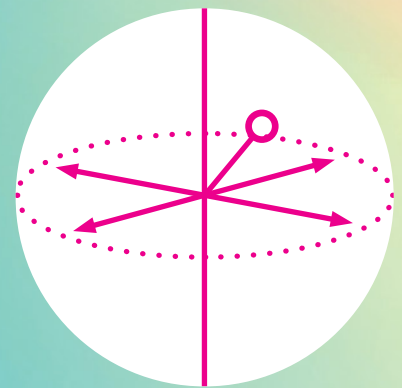
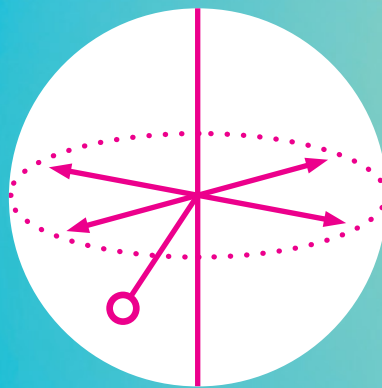
**the**



**Potential**



**of**



**Quantum**

**Computers**



Physicists are  
advancing the  
science that  
will power the  
computers  
of the future

BY EMILY HALNON

**Imagine a computer that could crack the encryption that currently safeguards all digital information from financial transactions to your personal identity – essentially breaking the internet as we know it. Now imagine this same computer could solve complex problems in a matter of minutes – problems that would take a classical computer many years to figure out. This kind of processing power could transform how the world addresses issues like climate change, drug development, national security and food scarcity.**

This computer is a quantum computer, a machine that would revolutionize what computers are capable of doing – and scientists and engineers around the world are racing to develop the first full-scale quantum computer to unlock this potential.

But, the immense potential of a quantum computer is blocked by the immense challenge of developing the technology and science behind it. Quantum computing is more complex than classical computing because of the depth of the foundational science that underlies it. And, there's still a lot of scientific work to be done before the world can go quantum.

Which is where University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers come in.

Researchers like Mark Eriksson, John Bardeen Professor of Physics and chair of the physics department. Eriksson has been working in quantum physics since 2001, tackling the underlying technology that could propel quantum computing. Eriksson's research focuses on exploring one of the more promising approaches to building a quantum computer.

One of the reasons it's so hard to develop quantum computers is that there's no clear and superior approach to building these machines, he explains. It's unlike the approach to building classical computers, which is well established and used by every major technology company.

"We don't know which approaches will be best for which parts of a quantum

computer, or if there's one approach that will be ideal for all parts of a quantum computer," he says. "The reason it's so hard to figure this out is that there are features of quantum computers that are incredibly challenging to develop."

One key difference between classical and quantum computers is that, at the root of this challenge, today's digital technology uses the language of bits, which consists of binary signals coded with the value of a zero or one. This language powers everything from a Zoom call to a Google search, to streaming your favorite Netflix show.

But in quantum computing, the bits are replaced by quantum bits, or "qubits," which can be not just either zeros or ones but can be *both* at the same time. This characteristic is known as "superposition," and it's one of the reasons quantum computing has so much potential – there are exponentially more value combinations when you link qubits together.

Harnessing that superposition quality is one of the key challenges of building a quantum computer, due to a core principle of quantum mechanics.

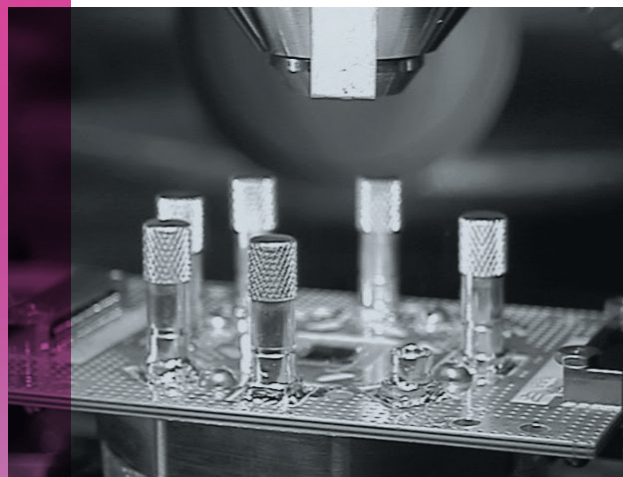
"In quantum mechanics, there's a fundamental notion that when you look at something or try to measure something, you disturb it," explained Mark Saffman, Johannes Rydberg Professor of Physics, who has also been working in quantum physics since 2001.



**The reason it's so hard to figure this out is that there are features of quantum computers that are incredibly challenging to develop.**



**MARK ERIKSSON**  
John Bardeen  
Professor of Physics  
and Chair of the  
Physics Department



Devices are placed with their mounting PCBs into the sample chamber of a scanning electron microscope.

Tackling this challenge is a main pillar of Eriksson's work to develop the foundational technology that could enable quantum computers.

Eriksson uses silicon to make qubits and leverages nanoscale electronic systems to manipulate them. Silicon is used in classical computing, and he says that it offers the advantage of being able to apply some of the same materials and technology to a quantum approach.

Eriksson traps electrons in the silicon using tiny metal gates, much like in a classical computer chip, and turns the electrons into qubits. The small metal gates allow him to contain and control the electrons, which he can move around through a high frequency voltage. He uses a magnetic force to assign and flip the values of the qubits between one and zero, similar to how magnetic force can be used to rotate a bar magnet between a north and a south pole.

This is all done on a nanoscale level, which means he's working with a scale that measures materials by the billionth of a meter. He uses cutting-edge nanofabrication technology to do this work through UW's Nanoscale Fabrication Center.

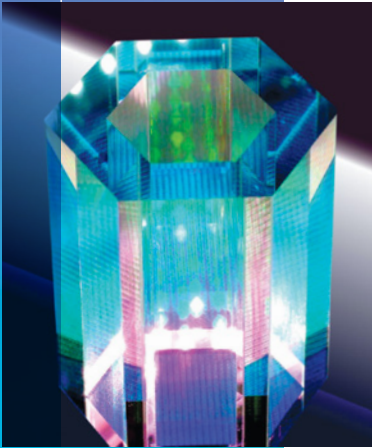
Another key feature – and challenge – of quantum computing is quantum entanglement, which means that qubits can be manipulated to change values depending on the value of other qubits. This feature is what will enable quantum

“If you try to look at, or measure, a quantum particle, doing so will push it and change it.”

Picture a coin spinning and landing on a table. If that coin was a qubit and you looked at it after it landed, you would erase its superposition power to be either a zero or a one – and fix its value instead – which would eliminate one of its most promising qualities for quantum computing.

“This characteristic of qubits offers huge potential for writing algorithms that will power quantum computing,” says Eriksson. “But it's a very fragile state – and one of the greatest challenges of quantum computing is finding a way to maintain a qubit's quantum state.”

A hexagonal vacuum cell used for quantum gate experiments



computers to run the really powerful algorithms that will elevate computing to the next level. But, entanglement is tricky due to the fragility of a qubit's superposition — you need to be able to change the value of qubits without looking at them or measuring them.

“It's really important to isolate qubits from anything that might change their superposition,” Eriksson explains. “But, we need to create strong interactions between qubits, because that's what powers useful algorithms.”

Eriksson's lab has done this on a small scale by placing the qubits 40 nanometers apart, which is so close that it's nearly impossible to comprehend just how tightly packed together they are. This proximity allows Eriksson to create strong interactions between qubits and entangle them. He has seen promising results through this method, but scaling it up is another challenge.

“We still have a long road ahead of us,” he says.

A usable quantum computer is years away by all accounts, but Eriksson's research trajectory offers a compelling example of how much this technology has progressed over the last two decades.

“When I started in 2001, we couldn't even contain one electron in silicon— never mind turning it into a qubit,” he says.

Silicon qubits are one of the major kinds of qubits driving the conversation around quantum technology, and researchers at UW-Madison cover nearly the entire spectrum of relevant qubits. It's one of the many examples of the institutional strength in quantum computing at UW, says Eriksson.

Saffman works with atomic qubits, another one of the most promising types, and says that one of the values of turning atoms into qubits is that they're “nature's qubits.”

Atoms are readily available and don't need to be fabricated, he explains. Atoms also have a natural uniformity, unlike fabricated qubits, which can have more irregularities, so atoms are a more reliable material to work with.

To turn atoms into qubits, Saffman isolates the atoms in a vacuum chamber and uses lasers to chill them so that they will remain stationary and isolated. Another series of lasers traps them so that they can be controlled and worked with, and yet another set of lasers controls the qubits and entangles them.

Saffman's lab built a promising small-scale computer using this method and completed algorithms using six qubits at a time. Now, they're working on translating this technology into a larger quantum computer.

“We see a lot of potential to scale this technology up,” he says.

When Saffman began working in quantum physics in 2001, they could only trap a single atom with a laser.

**This field has really evolved beyond physics because we're now at the stage where we know that the fundamental principles and ideas are valid, but we need to actually build full-scale quantum computers.**

**MARK SAFFMAN**  
Johannes Rydberg  
Professor of Physics





“We started with very limited knowledge,” he says. His scientific discoveries demonstrate just how much progress has been made in the last two decades.

Saffman is the director of the Wisconsin Quantum Institute, which supports interdisciplinary research across the most promising platforms for scalable quantum computing – and aims to solve problems of the physical world using the methods of quantum science and technology.

“This field has really evolved beyond physics because we’re now at the stage where we know that the fundamental principles and ideas are valid, but we need to actually build full-scale quantum computers,” Saffman explains. “And that involves a lot of engineering, computer science and interdisciplinary work, which the Wisconsin Quantum Institute seeks to coordinate and support.”

Micheline Soley, assistant professor of chemistry and affiliate of the physics department, is one of the researchers affiliated with the institute. Her research sits at the intersection of chemistry, physics, applied mathematics and computer sciences. Her work focuses on studying the ultracold chemistry involved with certain quantum computing methods and developing quantum computing algorithms, which will enable quantum computers to be used for more powerful processing.

“Quantum computing systems will expand to be able to solve bigger problems that we can’t currently solve, for applications in fields such as energy sciences or pharmaceuticals,” she says.

She points to the example of a classical computer trying to figure out how atoms move through the largest ultracold chemical system whose quantum movements have been studied exactly.

“It took 300,000 hours of computing time to solve how three atoms moved,” she says. “We have to have some kind of alternate approach to work on these problems with a greater dimensionality.”

Soley is examining how to create quantum methods that would address what’s known as the “curse of dimensionality,” which refers to how the cost of simulating chemical systems grows exponentially with the dimensionality of the chemical system.

Chemistry is a relatively new addition to the quantum field, and Soley is excited about the cyclical potential of quantum computing and chemistry – which is exhibited through her own research. She’s exploring the theory of how to use molecules to build quantum computers and how to use quantum computers to simulate different kinds of molecular systems to solve those bigger problems that classical computers just can’t solve.

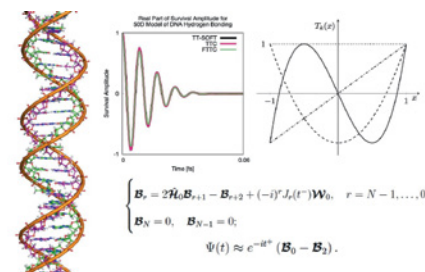
The basic science behind quantum computers is exciting, she says, as researchers work toward the common goal of transforming the world’s computers. But, there’s still so much important foundational work that needs to happen to get there, like the science that’s happening across UW.

“This field feels like applied science in so many ways, because we’re building quantum computers and working with them, but on the other end, it’s basic science and it’s still an open field, with so many questions to work on to build really powerful quantum computers. It’s exciting to see the progress and developments that scientists are making.” ■



**It took 300,000 hours of [classical] computing time to solve how three atoms moved. We have to have some kind of alternate approach to work on these problems with a greater dimensionality.**

**MICHELINE SOLEY**  
Assistant Professor  
of Chemistry



A key problem in theoretical chemistry today is the “curse of dimensionality,” which refers to the fact that the cost of simulating chemical systems with traditional quantum mechanics methods grows exponentially with the dimensionality of the chemical system.



# WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

A new multidisciplinary center is poised to explore the origins of life in the universe **BY AARON R. CONKLIN**



**To tackle the biggest questions,** it helps to have a big team.

And there aren't many questions more massive than the ones related to the origins of life on Earth and whether other worlds — the ones we already know and the ones we have yet to discover — could someday support life.

“This is one of humanity's biggest existential questions: Are we alone in the universe?”

states Richard Townsend, chair of the Department of Astronomy. “Even if the only other thing in the universe is single-celled organisms or some weird sort of crystalline silicon life, it doesn't matter. It's a complete philosophical game changer.”

The group Townsend is currently assembling could be a complete game changer, too. The Wisconsin Center for Origins Research (WiCOR) is a new multidisciplinary group that includes researchers from a whopping seven departments: astronomy, chemistry, integrative biology, geoscience, bacteriology (in the College of Agricultural & Life Sciences), botany, and atmospheric and oceanic sciences. Its creation is philanthropically supported and funded in part by the Department of Astronomy's Board of Visitors.

“The study of life's origin on Earth and potential origin elsewhere in the universe is catching fire now, thanks to new theories, novel experimental approaches, and the excitement of upcoming solar system exploration,” says David Baum, a professor of botany who studies the evolution of living organisms. “UW has great strength in this area, but until now we have not been well coordinated.”

“ [WiCOR] opens new ways of thinking about the science and new paths to creativity in science. And that’s exciting. ”

SUSANNA WIDICUS WEAVER  
Vozza Professor of  
Chemistry and Astronomy

WiCOR found its own spark of life in *Origins*, a 2019 multimedia project that UW–Madison Communications produced on the connections between research in the departments of astronomy, geoscience and anthropology. When Sebastian Heinz became chair of the Department of Astronomy that same year, he set out to build on that collaboration, using WiCOR as a vehicle. Then the recruiting began in earnest.

Susanna Widicus Weaver, an astrochemist whose appointment is split between chemistry and astronomy, was recruited to Madison in 2020. Shortly thereafter, a more expansive origins of life cluster of faculty positions was approved, resulting in three new assistant professors flocking to UW–Madison. Betül Kaçar, a professor of bacteriology, is an astrobiologist who studies ancient DNA. Thomas Beatty, a professor of astronomy, studies signs of life on exoplanets. Zoe Todd, a professor whose appointment, like Widicus Weaver’s, is split between chemistry and astronomy, studies early Earth chemistry and the delivery of biomolecules via impacts from comets and meteorites.

The recruitment process and creation of WiCOR has linked faculty colleagues who weren’t aware each other’s research was going on, let alone interrelated to their own.

Already, new synergies are starting to pop. Widicus Weaver studies how chemistry evolves in the formation of stars and planets. Kaçar and Todd study how planets and the life that might be on them form from the mix of material that Widicus Weaver identifies. And Beatty can take those findings to determine whether an exoplanet could support life or not.

“We know that there are more than 5,000 exoplanets orbiting other stars,” says Townsend, who studies the properties of massive stars. “We’re at the point where we can start measuring the composition of their atmospheres. We’re starting to talk to people in atmospheric and oceanic sciences, and they will be talking to people in geoscience who, in turn, will be talking to people who figure out how microbes can weather rocks and change the atmospheric chemistry.”

WiCOR will be located on the sixth floor of Sterling Hall in a space that’s being reimagined to promote a spirit of collaboration, with conference rooms and open areas for faculty and graduate students.

“We don’t want something that’s going to be a bolt-hole where people can hide from their departments,” quips Townsend. “We want something where people will bump into other people and interact with them.”

WiCOR will clearly be many things to different people, as evidenced by the metaphors each scientist uses to describe it. To Widicus Weaver, it’s an umbrella that covers a diverse and interdisciplinary field.

“It opens new ways of thinking about the science and new paths to creativity in science. And that’s exciting,” she says.

To Baum, it’s the center of a pie, where the tip of each departmental slice touches key scientific questions about the origins of life. Townsend selects a different term to describe WiCOR—a bridge.

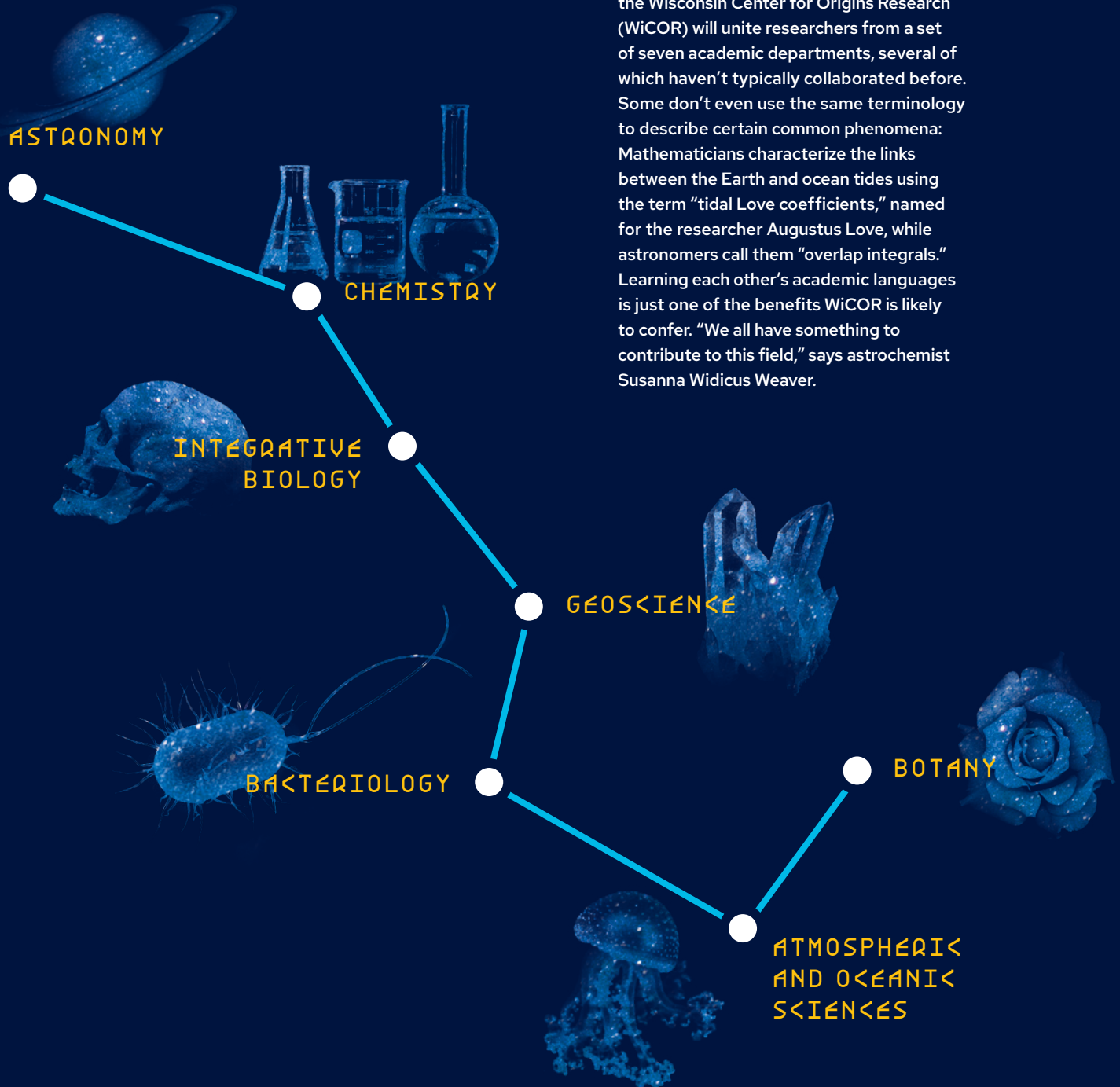
“We were very careful to space people at a regular distance along the bridge so that, although somebody at this end of the bridge might not understand somebody at the other end of the bridge, they will always have a neighbor to talk to who could talk to the next person,” he explains. “And slowly we can get to a point where we can all talk to each other.”

To students, WiCOR could be a clearinghouse that puts them on the cutting edge of the biggest questions in origins of life research.

“We will offer experiences that will give students skill sets that they can’t develop anywhere else,” says Widicus Weaver. And maybe, just maybe, answer some of the universe’s biggest questions. ■

# THE POWER OF CONNECTION

Like a constellation of connected stars, the Wisconsin Center for Origins Research (WiCOR) will unite researchers from a set of seven academic departments, several of which haven't typically collaborated before. Some don't even use the same terminology to describe certain common phenomena: Mathematicians characterize the links between the Earth and ocean tides using the term "tidal Love coefficients," named for the researcher Augustus Love, while astronomers call them "overlap integrals." Learning each other's academic languages is just one of the benefits WiCOR is likely to confer. "We all have something to contribute to this field," says astrochemist Susanna Widicus Weaver.





# CREATIVE FORCE

UW's Creative Writing Program continues to attract top-notch talent – and pile up awards

BY AARON R. CONKLIN

**W**hile she was busily writing her first novel, Dantiel W. Moniz would come out to the writing oasis she had created on the balcony of her third-floor Florida apartment and spend time looking down at the people moving below her on the sidewalk and parking lot.

Among other things, she noticed that people only rarely looked up.

Some of the observations Moniz made from her third-story perch made their way into *Milk Blood Heat*, her wildly successful 2021 collection of short stories, which was short-listed for multiple national awards, including as a finalist for the prestigious PEN/Jean Stein Book Award last year.



PHOTO: JASON D. MONIZ

Dantiel W. Moniz's first collection of short stories, *Milk Blood Heat*, was a finalist for a 2022 PEN/Jean Stein Book Award.



But finishing her novel, a tale about a woman who discovers she didn't know her mother as well as she thought she did, required coming back to the place she had earned her undergraduate degree — UW-Madison's Creative Writing Program. Moniz received her master's degree here in 2018 and is now an assistant professor of English with the program.

"I thought, I need guidance. I need mentorship and I need time," she says. "The support that I had from this program on every single level was just inconceivable. I had never known that there would be a program that would support me on a human level and an artistic level like this."

Moniz is just one of a seemingly endless stream of success stories coming out of UW-Madison's Creative Writing Program in recent years. Last year, a pair of 2021 graduate students, Alison Thumel and Ajibola Tolase, scored uber-competitive Wallace Stegner Fellowships in Poetry at Stanford University — a gig that only five poets nationwide are offered each year. Amy Quan Barry, Lorraine Hansberry Professor of English and one of the program's more prolific professors, debuted an original play (*The Mytilenean Debate*) and published her third novel (*When I'm Gone, Look for Me in the East*) in 2022. And the program just hired a quartet of new poetry professors (see sidebar) to jolt that section of the program.

Beth (Bich Minh) Nguyen, Dorothy Draheim Professor of English and Director of the Creative Writing Program, who has earned her own accolades — she contributed to the 2021 compilation of America's Best Essays — is both awed and unsurprised by the ecosystem of production and success in which she and her colleagues are working and teaching.

"Creative writing is a really tough business," says Nguyen. "It's so personal. It's art that everybody could do. It is putting yourself out there. It's rigorous, intellectually, and I think that UW really excels in creating an environment in which that work can happen, but in a space that feels safe."

UW's Creative Writing Program is one of the only ones nationwide to address and teach writing at the undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate levels. Postgraduate

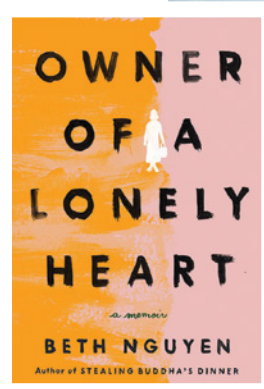


PHOTO: JIM BARNARD

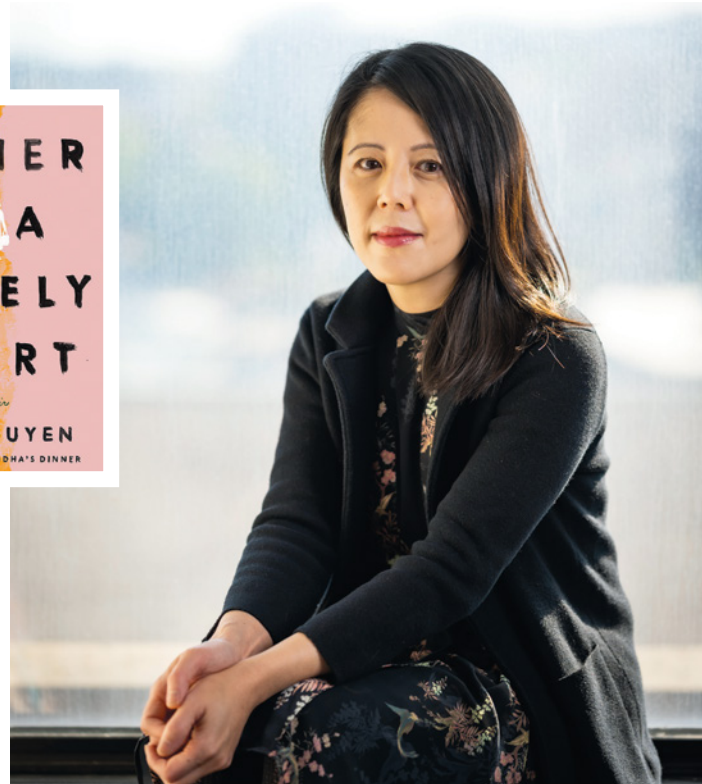
students teach undergraduates in the Introduction to Creative Writing course, a class that's wildly popular with students majoring in everything from data science to psychology and English.

"We're a smaller program that accounts for 50 percent of the majors in the English department," says Moniz. "We're small, but we're also mighty. The work that we're doing here, hopefully, other areas of the college can see that and then we can continue to get more support."

Instead of opting for a vibe that is competitive and cutthroat, UW's program focuses on a different "C": collaboration. Faculty members and graduate students meet regularly to discuss and critique each other's work and plan upcoming projects, a spirit Nguyen says trickles down to the undergraduates. Paying close attention to maintaining diversity has also helped.



Beth Nguyen's newest book is a memoir that examines her relationship with her mother and the impact of resettling from Vietnam to America.





## POETRY IN MOTION

**T**he Creative Writing Program has given its poetry offerings a huge shot in the arm, hiring four new faculty members: Assistant Professor of English Nate Marshall, whose poetry collection *Finna* was recognized as one of the best books of 2020 by National Public Radio, and Professor of English Erika Meitner, a multiple award-winning poet who is directing the Master of Fine Arts Program, began teaching last fall. Assistant Professor Paul Tran, who recently published a collection of poems called *All the Flowers Kneeling*, and teaching faculty member Alison C. Rollins, a former National Endowment Literature Fellow, begin teaching in Fall 2023.



Nate Marshall



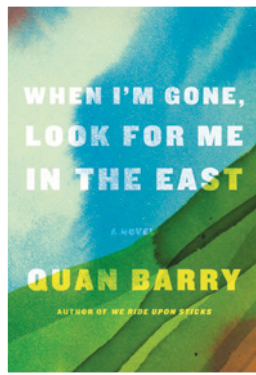
Erika Meitner



Paul Tran



Alison C. Rollins



Amy Quan Berry had a productive 2022, staging an original play and publishing her third novel.

“The diversity of our experiences and our backgrounds brings the students the kind of openness that they crave,” she says. “They are looking for ways to express their thoughts and ideas.”

Nguyen points to the cliché that writers do some of their best work in coffee shops, seeing other people working around them. While she personally prefers to compose in solitude while gazing out the window – not unlike the way Moniz gazed down from her Florida balcony – she is inspired by the sense of her colleagues all working in their spaces at the same time she is. And it also inspires her students.

“It elevates everyone else, so we all feel like we’re in this together, we’re all going to do something,” she says. “We’re at different tables and different spaces in different houses, but we’re all working toward something.”

Having pumped up the poetry offerings, the next planned frontier for the program is to bolster its creative nonfiction offerings. The genre, which includes everything from social media to blockbusters like Patrick Radden Keefe’s *Empire of Pain*, is among the fastest growing in literature, including at UW. In a nod to the Wisconsin Idea, Nguyen also plans to spearhead greater collaboration between the Creative Writing Program and other parts of campus, focusing on topics such as environment, ecology, science and medicine.

“I feel like we’re in a really golden period of creative writing,” says Nguyen. “And everything seems possible.”

Nguyen, whose family emigrated to the United States in the wake of the Vietnam War, is on the cusp of releasing her latest book, *Owner of a Lonely Heart*, a collection of essays about refugee identity. ■



PHOTO: JOHN DAVIS



# Keeping Up with Camera

Bradinn French ('08) hits his stride as a Hollywood film editor.

BY AARON R. CONKLIN

painting. It's a lot of fine detail, and you end up with this elaborate, detailed portrait that you arrive at in a completely different way. In the last few years, I have been able to make a jump over to another area that I was really looking to get into, and it's been serving me well."

You can say that again. French's profile has been on the serious ups over the past five years. His film editing resume includes documentaries (2011's *Dark Girls* and 2018's *Medal of Honor*) and work on the tenth season of *American Horror Story*. His office décor includes the 2022 Primetime Emmy and the 2023 American Cinema Editors awards he won for the editing work he did on several episodes of the first season of HBO's popular *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. The trophies are tucked inconspicuously on a corner table behind his workstation in the L.A. home he shares with his wife, Nicole, and their son, Israel.

French has been spending a lot of time there lately, crunching 12-plus-hour days since November working on his latest big project: *Washington Black*, an upcoming series for Hulu based on the novel by Esi Edugyan, about a young Black boy in Barbados who escapes slavery and travels the world with an inventor while trying to elude his captors. French describes it as "ambitious and emotional." He is thrilled to be editing a dramatic series.

"In this world I'm in, it can be difficult to leap across different formats and genres," says French. "People tend to want to pin you into one place or another."

French started in documentary film and reality television but slowly began to expand his scope. He used the pandemic to leverage and expand his brand, collecting the emails of producers and vice presidents who participated in Zoom panels and using them to launch conversations.

# A

s he considers the nuances of his craft, Bradinn French reaches for an art metaphor to describe the differences in the genres in which he has worked.

"Editing a documentary is like making a sculpture — like you've got this big block and you're chiseling at it, finding the pieces to tell the story that you want to tell," says French, a 2008 communication arts graduate who has been working as a film editor in Los Angeles for the past 14 years. "Doing scripted work is like



Dark Girls



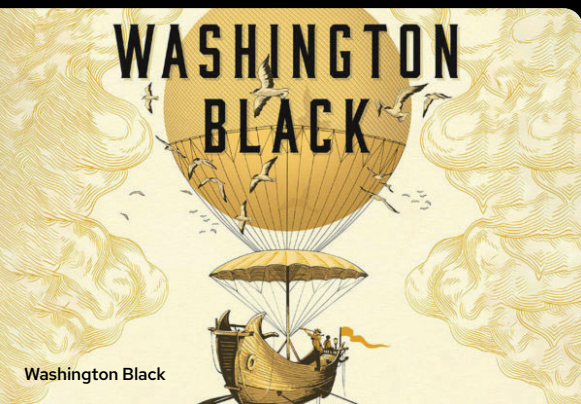
Medal of Honor



American Horror Story



A Black Lady Sketch Show



Washington Black

Bradinn French has successfully navigated entertainment formats and genres, moving from documentaries to scripted work and from horror and comedy to drama.

**“[Film editors] are essentially crafting the exact thing that is going to be on air or on the screen... We are the last stop on the filmmaking train, and I think that’s why I’m so passionate about it.”**

BRADINN FRENCH

Not bad for a man who describes himself as a serious introvert.

“It really changed the math as far as putting your foot into a door because, previously, there were a lot of executives I was never able to meet because, you know, I gotta take off work,” French explains. “I gotta go to their building. I gotta make my way in, and these people are insanely busy.” The strategy helped land him the *American Horror Story* gig, which in turn led to *A Black Lady Sketch Show*.

To French, film editing is the quiet, solitary art of storytelling, not just removing the bad parts and highlighting the good.

“You are essentially crafting the exact thing that is going to be on air or on the screen,” he says. “And then audiences are going to experience and feel all that comes from the film editing. We are the last stop on the filmmaking train, and I think that’s why I’m so passionate about it, because I love sitting in those rooms late at night with all this footage and figuring out how to put it together in a way that’s going to make you feel something.”

French’s gig can be magical, but it’s also extremely stressful. He talks about a term called “keeping up with camera,” which equates to quickly assembling scenes from piles of raw footage on a near-daily basis.

“It’s one thing to just do it. It’s another thing for it to be good,” says French. “No one is making TV shows or movies to be okay. Nobody’s settling on ‘A for effort.’”

When French, who grew up in Madison, first came to UW-Madison in 2003, he thought he would be shooting film, not editing it. His childhood should have telegraphed it. Young Bradinn paired his family’s oversized VCR players to edit video mixtapes from his and his sister’s home movies. In high school, instead of authoring an essay on Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, French filmed and edited his own interpretation of the book.

French’s docket is filled with *Washington Black*, and he and Nicole, an attorney, actor and screenwriter, are expecting their second child later this year. But French has an extensive list of projects he’d eventually like to tackle, including taking another crack at feature films and forming his own creative team.

“I would really love to dip into sci-fi, stuff like *Blade Runner*,” French says. “But there are all kinds of genres and formats that I would like to explore. I am constantly trying to plant those seeds.” ■



## A Fuller History

A groundbreaking professor opened David Meissner ('60) up to a more complex picture of historic events. Now, his generosity ensures that nuanced ways of considering the past continue.

BY KATIE VAUGHN '03

D

avid Meissner was raised on history. As a child in suburban Milwaukee, his father read him stories about the Revolutionary War, the Civil War and other events of the past. It made an impression.

Meissner followed in his father's and grandfather's footsteps in attending the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He started college with the intention of becoming a doctor, but he augmented the requisite science curriculum with courses in economics and history.

Part of the pull to the history department was a professor who would capture Meissner's attention and help shape his future.

William Appleman Williams taught U.S. foreign relations at UW from 1957 to 1968, challenging traditional thinking on American behavior overseas and critiquing the country's actions during the Cold War.

"He really had an effect on the students," Meissner says. "He looked at American history and said, yes, we've done a lot to help others, but what did we gain from it? Are we doing it for goodwill or are we doing it for ourselves?"

Meissner began writing a thesis for Williams but left it unfinished to begin medical school, briefly. "I ended up dropping out of medical school and going back to history and finishing my thesis," he says, adding that he worked as a teaching assistant for Williams.

His mentor helped Meissner secure a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to earn his master's degree in American history at the University of California-Berkeley.

Meissner returned to California after being drafted into the U.S. Navy, conducting oceanographic research and, surprisingly, editing his base's newspaper — a position he held once his commanding officer learned he had experience selling ads for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

After his time in the service, Meissner returned to Milwaukee and the *Journal Sentinel*. He started out as a reporter and worked his way up to an editorial writer covering foreign policy, economics and

PHOTO: SARA STRATHAS



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE JOHN D. AND CATHERINE T. MACARTHUR FOUNDATION



## A New Perspective

By examining the experiences of ordinary people caught in the machinery of war, Monica Kim creates a stark new narrative that complicates official, top-down accounts and proposes fresh ways to consider the roots of long-standing conflicts simmering around the globe.

BY MARY ELLEN GABRIEL

Monica Kim became interested in analyzing the Korean conflict because her own childhood—her Korean parents immigrated to the U.S. due to the Korean War—raised questions for her.

“The war was really present in my family during my childhood,” she says. “Yet at school, growing up, it was completely absent from textbooks or discussions. I wanted to do a bottom-up history of the Korean War—not from the vantage points of heads of state and military leaders, but from those of ordinary people like soldiers or farmers, like my family members were.”

Kim examines the dynamics between U.S. empire, race and decolonization by tracking the changes in warfare over the course of the 20th century, particularly

the “wars of intervention” undertaken by the U.S. during the Cold War. She joined the UW–Madison faculty as the William Appleman Williams & David G. and Marion S. Meissner Chair in U.S. International and Diplomatic History in 2020, and, in 2022, she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship “genius grant.”

History Department Chair Anne Hansen says Kim’s research is distinctive for the depth of its originality and humanity.

“She asks new and compelling questions about subjects we think we know, enabling us to understand international events at different scales and through the lenses of new archives and previously unheard voices,” she says. “Her classes speak to exactly the kinds of questions and concerns about global historical processes and social justice that our students most want to study.”

national defense. The paper sent him all over the world—to Latin America, Europe and Asia—and the State Department requested that he go to Europe to lecture on U.S. economic and foreign policy before the 1980 election.

He also held professional fellowships in journalism at Stanford University and international affairs at Harvard University.

Meissner left the newspaper in 1981 to serve as executive director of the Greater Milwaukee Committee, focusing

on downtown renewal. He later became a managing partner of a public relations firm before taking over the Public Policy Forum in 1995.

Throughout his career, Meissner maintained ties to UW–Madison, including serving on the board of visitors for the Department of History and the College of Letters & Science.

In 2020, he and his wife created the William Appleman Williams & David G. and Marion S. Meissner Chair in U.S.

International and Diplomatic History, a position held by Monica Kim, who explores the Korean War in a spirit reminiscent of Williams’. It’s an approach Meissner believes is crucial for understanding history and America’s place in it.

“We are a world power, and it is important to know how we got there and why,” he says. “It is important for students to grasp these issues.” ■



# Finding a Voice, Finding a Purpose

BY KAYLEY SEOW



ILLUSTRATION: JING WEI

**G**oing into college, people always tell you that it's going to take some time to find yourself, be it through new friends, hobbies or – the most important (and hardest to find) of all – a genuine sense of purpose.

Stumbling into UW–Madison as a freshman from California, thousands of miles away from family and friends, finding college friends and new hobbies proved to be the easy part. I found the former in my calculus discussion, and the latter through the University Band, WACM (ACM's Women in Computing), and a couple other clubs and events. Still, I wanted to make an impact in the College, but I didn't know where to start. An email informing me that



Kayley Seow is a sophomore majoring in Computer Sciences and Statistics.

L&S Dean's Ambassador applications were open changed that. I immediately applied and have never looked back.

Although I've only served as a Dean's Ambassador for less than a year, I can say that the experience has been deeply rewarding. During our monthly meetings/discussions, it has been interesting to see how we can offer input on different issues regarding the College, be it increasing student engagement and setting up resources for students to bigger things such as the 2030 plan for a liberal arts education and opportunities for students to engage in research. By participating in these monthly meetings and activities, I have had the chance to give my input directly to Dean Eric Wilcots. Through this program, I began to feel like my voice was truly being heard, and that it meant something.

Serving as a Dean's Ambassador has meant giving back to the Letters & Science community, both past and present. One of my fondest memories was volunteering at the inaugural L&S [RE]CONNECT event, where L&S alumni of color were invited back to UW–Madison in a homecoming of sorts. During a weekend filled with tours, presentations and a quintessential Badger football game, I had the opportunity to meet and talk with many amazing L&S alums.

I heard stories of their times as students on campus and all the different places their L&S degrees took them, from serving stints at various U.S. Embassies, consulting for companies overseas, starting their own firms, even staying close to home. No matter where their paths took them, they continued to serve UW–Madison students, each making tremendous impacts in their own ways. There comes a time, as a student, when you realize that you have your whole life ahead of you after graduation. That reality can be hard to face. For me, hearing these stories of success from alumni, I realized that as long as I continue to work hard, I will be all right.

Some students take the entirety of their undergraduate time here at UW–Madison to find their sense of purpose. I consider myself lucky to have found it far sooner through the L&S Dean's Ambassador program. As an ambassador, knowing I have a duty to serve my Letters & Science community and advocate for my peers in the College is a purpose I am proud to work toward every day. ■

**“Chancellor  
Blank’s  
leadership was  
the perfect  
combination  
of strength  
and compassion,  
rationality  
and empathy.”**

**JOSHUA GUTZMANN**  
2018 Senior Class Officer

Chancellor Emerita  
Rebecca M. Blank, who  
led UW–Madison from  
2013–2022, passed away  
in February. The College  
of Letters & Science  
created a tribute video  
featuring the voices of  
some of the L&S students  
whose lives she touched.  
You may watch it on our  
YouTube channel here:  
**[go.wisc.edu/LS-Blank](https://go.wisc.edu/LS-Blank)**





## Last Word

Christina Weatherford spent last summer studying lakes and aquatic species at Trout Lake Station in Boulder Junction, Wisconsin, the satellite research site of the College of Letters & Science's Center for Limnology. Weatherford's internship experiences inspired her to create this acrylic painting of zooplankton, tiny organisms that are critical to the aquatic food web. The painting, which depicts zooplankton found in Escanaba Lake in Vilas County, was one of the winners of UW-Madison's 2022 Cool Science Image Contest and now hangs in the Center for Limnology facility along the Lakeshore Path at UW-Madison.

ILLUSTRATION: CHRISTINA WEATHERFORD

