WINTER/SPRING 2025

colloquy

HARVARD KENNETH C. GRIFFIN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS & SCIENCES

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COVER ARTIST: CHAD HAGEN

GIVEN OUR PLACE AT THE CENTER OF THE University's long tradition of excellence, it should be no surprise that Harvard Griffin GSAS remains home to an impressive number of Nobel laureates. Gary Ruvkun, PhD '82, became the latest honoree in October when he won the 2024 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. Ruvkun earned this recognition for his contributions to the discovery of microRNA, a new class of tiny RNA molecules that plays a crucial role in gene regulation (see more on page 5). I firmly believe that it is Harvard Griffin GSAS's unique educational environment—where students are encouraged to ask questions, collaborate, and debate—that serves as an incubator for such research, which goes on to change the world.

We continue to move forward with two projects designed to enhance the academic experience and ensure that our students are prepared to take on the challenges of their varied careers post-graduation. Meetings with graduate programs to discuss implementation of the recommendations from the GSAS Admissions and Graduate Education (GAGE) report continue, which include aspects of admissions, advising, training, and more. These conversations were aided by the treasure trove of resources and tools for faculty and students amassed by an additional effort, The Advising Project (TAP). Beginning this fall, the TAP team held seminars virtually and in person and elevated the importance of a strong and healthy advising relationship for faculty and students alike (see more on page 4). As we begin the spring term, both these projects will continue apace, and I look forward to sharing more updates with you in the future.

This spring will be another vibrant season on campus, with many opportunities to engage with our students, from Alumni Day to the Harvard Horizons Symposium. The invitation remains open to join me in Cambridge and witness firsthand what makes Harvard Griffin GSAS—our curious, exceptional students and alumni—the beating heart of the University.

—EMMA DENCH
DEAN

colloquy WINTER/ SPRING 2025

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
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PHOTOGRAPHER: KATHLEEN DOOHER

Some of the Harvard Kenneth C. Griffin Graduate School of Arts and Sciences' remarkable students and alumni speak about their research, their lives, and their time at the School.

●●● **Read the full profiles and find many more at** *gsas.harvard.edu/news/topic/voices.*

A LEAP OF FAITH

I took a big leap of faith by applying for political asylum rather than going back home [to Ethiopia]. I was unable to afford an immigration lawyer with my salary as a waitress . . . I taught myself how to write my asylum case on a borrowed laptop using the internet as a guide, and I was granted asylum, which enabled me to continue my high school education. . . . I decided to join Harvard Griffin GSAS because . . . I wanted to be in an environment that is safe, welcoming, and empowering so a person and a scientist like me can thrive.

KIDIST ASHAMI, PHD STUDENT
Biological and Biomedical Sciences

STUDYING SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND STIGMA

I developed and tested a self-report measure of sexual violence stigma and embedded it in two population-based samples of survivors, one in the US and one in Sweden. In both samples, a greater sexual violence stigma burden was associated with more severe symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). . . . In the future, I hope to build on this work so that I can ultimately make recommendations to clinicians regarding stigma-informed treatment of survivors of sexual violence.

EMILY MELLEN, PHD STUDENT
Clinical Psychology

CHARTING THE EVOLUTION OF CLIMATE CHANGE

The work that Professor Jim Anderson's group is doing today is revolutionary. We are building new technologies that will enable scientists to predict and analyze exactly what will happen to the planet as climate change continues to evolve, providing the information necessary for our society's economic and political stability. This research, like most climate research, has actual life-saving implications. Even if the impact comes twenty years down the line, better late than never.

JOE GONZALES, PHD STUDENT
Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology

PRINTING TISSUE

I use 3D bioprinting to fabricate stem cells and other materials into tissues. I try to differentiate the cells as they are printed, rather than do nothing or print specific types. I can control the genetic changes I make to the cells as they print so I can produce multiple types and position them to form specific structures in the tissue. While we can't genetically engineer every cell type we're interested in, we could one day produce fully genetically engineered tissues.

ARIC LU, PHD '24
Engineering Sciences

PHOTOGRAPHER: TONY RINALDO (GONZALES)

TAP Rejuvenated

THE ADVISING PROJECT

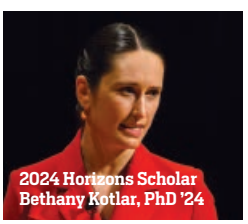
The 2023 Report of the GSAS Admissions and Graduate Education (GAGE) Working Group affirmed the importance of advising for graduate student success and well-being. While students often express satisfaction with their advisors on annual exit surveys, the report noted that providing more structure and consistency in advising could make the relationship more effective and reduce student stress. Improving advising might also help lower the time to degree and increase students' satisfaction with the PhD program.

To address these concerns, Dean Emma Dench launched The Advising Project (TAP) in 2019, which puts student success and well-being at the center of the advising relationship. Five years on, TAP is poised to increase its impact under the guidance of new assistant directors **Katie Callam**, PhD '20, and Dr. **Rogers Walker**.

One goal for TAP in the coming year is to encourage the use of "advising agreements" by advisors and advisees across disciplines – written documents that lay out the parameters for an advising relationship, covering topics such as communication, feedback, professional development, and authorship. "As someone who was both a doctoral student and a faculty member, I know that it can feel harrowing for students when they don't know if their advisor will respond in time for them to apply for a job or fellowship," Dench says. TAP's other core offerings include workshops designed to enhance advising experience and practice.

Callam and Walker portray The Advising Project as a living, evolving initiative. They are committed to soliciting feedback, adapting their approaches, and continually finding new ways to improve the advising experience and make real Dean Dench's vision of a culture of advising.

"Graduate education is dynamic, particularly at Harvard Griffin GSAS," says Walker. "Through all the changes, advising remains a pillar of support, guidance, and growth. Like Dean Dench, Katie and I are devoted to creating an environment where faculty advisers and students both thrive."



2024 Horizons Scholar Bethany Kotlar, PhD '24

NEW HORIZONS

In December, Harvard Griffin GSAS announced the 2025 Harvard Horizons Scholars, selected as representatives of the extraordinary researchers who make up Harvard's PhD community. The eight students, whose topics of study include photochemistry, youth psychotherapies, and artificial intelligence, form the 12th class of the Society of Horizons Scholars, a fellowship cohort that offers opportunities for long-lasting community, mentorship, and professional and academic growth. The scholars will receive in-depth mentoring on the art of effective presentation, preparing them for a campus-wide symposium in Sanders Theatre on April 8, 2025.

Find out more about the scholars and their research *at gsas.harvard.edu/news/announcing-2025-harvard-horizons-scholars.*

FROM THE *COLLOQUY* PODCAST

"Bob Dylan in the mid-60s seems to be someone who is prophetically announcing his lack of full moral goodness. And that's unusual."

– UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PROFESSOR JEFFREY EDWARD GREEN, PHD '07
gsas.harvard.edu/news/colloquy-podcast-bob-dylan-complete-unknown-prophet-without-god

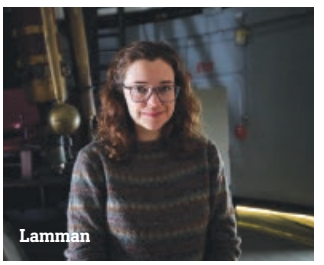
L to R: Kathryn Hollar, Robinson Tom, Rohan Thaku, and Franklin Sage on a panel at the "Beyond Western Approaches: Recognizing Indigenous Traditions in Engineering" symposium

Exploring Indigenous Traditions in Engineering

For centuries, indigenous peoples have had their own system of research, education, and the transmission of knowledge – including the fields of science and engineering. Last October, the Harvard John A. Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences explored these traditions at "Beyond Western Approaches: Recognizing Indigenous Traditions in Engineering," a symposium that included panels on advancing Indigenous engagement in engineering, exploring gold mining's environmental impact, and culturally grounded research. "One of the big messages from our government and elders is to go to school, get an education, climb that ladder, then come back and do good stuff," said panel participant **Robinson Tom**, a third-year PhD student in bioengineering at Harvard. "One of the strongest things about engineering is that it can produce laboratories that can bring native scientists, doctors and engineers back to the reservation to actually give back to the people."

••• **Find full coverage of the symposium** *at seas.harvard.edu/news/2024/10/integrating-traditional-and-academic-knowledge.*

EXPANDING THE HORIZON OF SCIENCE COMMUNICATION



Lamman

As a 2024 Harvard Horizons Scholar, astronomy PhD student **Clare Lamman** received expert coaching on presenting her groundbreaking work mapping the universe to a wide audience. Last fall, her skills were recognized with the Eric and Wendy Schmidt Award for Excellence in Science Communications. Given annually by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in partnership with Schmidt Sciences, the award recognizes individuals "who can demonstrate the potential or ability to develop high-quality, engaging science communications or reporting." Lamman received a share of $640,000 divided among the award's 24 recipients.

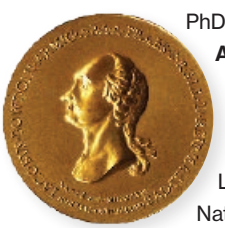
A NOBEL FOR RUVKIN

Ruvkin, PhD '82

Gary Ruvkun, PhD '82, professor of genetics at Harvard Medical School was awarded the 2024 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine last October for the discovery of microRNA, a class of tiny RNA molecules that regulate the activities of thousands of genes in plants and animals, including humans. Harvard President Alan M. Garber extended his congratulations to Ruvkun and his longtime collaborator Victor Ambros, with whom he shared the prize, praising their pioneering research. "The implications of discoveries like Gary's and Victor's aren't always obvious at the outset," Garber said. "With promising medical applications of microRNA research on the horizon, we are reminded – again – that basic research can lead to dramatic progress in addressing human diseases."

••• **Learn more about Ruvkin's research at** *news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2024/10/harvard-scientist-awarded-nobel.*

ENGAGING ESSAYS



PhD students **Elinor Hitt** (English), **Lucy Liu** (mathematics), and **Adam Lowet** (medical sciences) were last fall's Bowdoin Prize winners. Hitt's essay, "On Beauty, Balanchine, and Farrell: Platonic Modernism on the New York Dance Stage," took the award for Graduate Essay in the English Language. Liu and Lowet both won prizes for Graduate Essay in the Natural Sciences, Liu for "The Most Mysterious Thing That Ever Happened to Me," Lowet for "Risky Business: How the Brain Learns from Uncertainty." Established in 1791, the Bowdoin Prizes, now $3,500 each, have been awarded to philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson; former Harvard presidents Charles Eliot and Nathan Pusey, PhD '37; the novelist John Updike; and the writer and philosopher Alain LeRoy Locke, PhD '18.

PHOTOGRAPHERS: STEPHANIE MITCHELL/HARVARD UNIVERSITY (RUVKIN); DAVE SALAFIA (LAMMAN)

WHEN COLLEGES IGNORE INEQUALITY

IN HIS 2024 BOOK *CLASS DISMISSED*, BOSTON UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR **ANTHONY ABRAHAM JACK**, PHD '16, LEVERAGES THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS A MICROSCOPE FOR CAMPUS INEQUALITY. HE SHOWS HOW ELITE UNIVERSITIES ARE OFTEN UNPREPARED TO SUPPORT STUDENTS FROM THE ECONOMICALLY DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS THEY INCREASINGLY VALUE, AND OFFERS A PATHWAY TO A MORE EQUITABLE FUTURE.

What is the "hidden curriculum" in higher education? How does it disadvantage students from lower-income or underrepresented backgrounds?

The hidden curriculum is a system of unwritten rules and unset expectations. So often, we don't make explicit what something means because we get so used to the shorthand. But the problem is that shorthand has been passed down from generation to generation. It's not just the people who have been at the same school throughout their entire family lineage, but also those who have had careers in higher education. After all, a recent report in *Nature* showed that people with PhDs are 12 to 25 times more likely to have a parent with a PhD than the average American.

I write about how office hours are an important part of the college experience. It's where faculty become advisors and advisors become mentors. We say *when* office hours are but we don't say *what* they are. In *Class Dismissed*, I show that the labor market on college campuses is segregated because so many of the high-impact jobs—those that engage the

PHOTOGRAPHER: CHRIS D'AMORE

> ***"Doing this research during the pandemic was like watching class inequality unfold and grow under a microscope."***
>
> —ANTHONY ABRAHAM JACK

life of the mind like research and teaching—are more likely to be doled out in office hours as compared to being posted online by student employment or career services offices. You have to be in the room to get the position. But you have to be comfortable with the environment to be in the room. That's why the hidden curriculum is so important to interrogate and make explicit.

How did the COVID-19 pandemic highlight these issues among students at elite institutions?

Doing this research during the pandemic was like watching class inequality unfold and grow under a microscope. When students were sent home, it was an opportunity for us to be invited into places that are usually shielded from view. We got into the homes of both the rich and those who came from lesser means. We got to see how the rich vacation and live because they were posting to Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram. We also got insight into the most savage inequalities as they unfolded in lower-income students' families and communities. Both are important for us to understand. If there's one thing I hope the book does, it's to move us away from ever talking about the "college bubble" again. College is not some kind of impenetrable barrier that keeps problems at bay and gives students a safe haven. If anything, it amplifies many of the inequalities that our most vulnerable students have to contend with even after walking through the college gates.

You've talked about the "savage inequalities" that came to light during research for *Class Dismissed*. What were they?

The Citizen app for your smartphone can help you figure out what roads to stay away from when there's a water main break or a blown streetlight. But August, a student I met, shared how he used the app to see how close trouble is to his home and family, so frequent were the warnings about gunshots, stabbings, and police activity. That's a savage inequality, and not just because of the stress some students have to deal with while at home or checking up on home while on campus.

But there is a deeper issue. Campus policies ignore place-based inequalities. We see this most acutely in academic leave policies, especially how punitive they are. Think about students from more rural backgrounds. I interviewed some from rural Appalachia and reservations in the Midwest. When they faced mandatory leave, it was usually because the old responsibilities of home were conflicting with their new role as students. So, the school sent them home and told them they had to get a full-time job if they wanted to come back to campus at some point. If you come from a community where mine closures are becoming more and more common or if you're from a reservation where jobs are scarce, how can you comply with that?

The 2023 Supreme Court ruling in Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard has changed the landscape of diversity in college admissions. What are your concerns about the future and what can universities do to foster inclusion?

My work shows how universities were increasing access before SFFA while also deepening inequalities because the institutions were not ready for the diversity they were recruiting. Now, in light of the Supreme Court decision, there's a shift to recruit and admit even more first-generation and lower-income college students for whom they are still not prepared.

My research shows that there are actionable solutions that could not only make our campus accessible but more equitable. Oftentimes, the policies that have the biggest impact on students' lives come from invisible offices that nobody ever studies. Universities need to conduct an internal investigation, looking at those spaces. Student employment is one. Mental health is another. How students are sorted into each of those makes a big difference. I hope my work inspires universities to answer the question, "Now that we know what we know, what are we going to do about it?"

CURRICULUM VITAE

Boston University
Inaugural Faculty Director, Newbury Center, 2023–Present

Associate Professor of Higher Education Leadership (tenured), Wheelock College of Education and Human Development, Affiliate, Department of Sociology, 2023–Present

Harvard University
Radcliffe Fellow, Harvard Radcliffe Institute, 2021–2022

Assistant Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2018–2023

Shutzer Assistant Professor, Harvard Radcliffe Institute, 2017–2023

Harvard University
PhD in Sociology, 2016

Amherst College
BA in Women's and Gender Studies, Religion, 2007

Humanities 2.0

Illustration By Chad Hagen

HARVARD GRIFFIN GSAS ALUMNI ARE REDEFINING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE HUMANITIES, tackling pressing contemporary challenges. Harvard Divinity School's Ben Dunning, PhD '05, examines early Christian narratives that have shaped enduring gender perceptions. University of London's Becca Voelcker, PhD '21, explores how cinematic narratives influence our environmental understanding amid climate change. Meanwhile, University of California researcher Nina Beguš, PhD '20, uncovers the surprising role of ancient myths in shaping cutting-edge AI technologies. Together, these scholars illuminate the innovative and unexpected ways stories shape our past, present, and future.

Doing As the Romans Did

EARLY CHRISTIANS INHERITED—AND REACTED TO—ROMAN VIEWS OF SEX AND GENDER. HOW RELEVANT ARE THEY TODAY?

BY KELLY HAHN | *Photographs By Mark Ostow*

CANDIDATES IN THE 2024 US ELECTIONS who identified as Christian often thundered against "gender ideology" claiming that God created two genders, male and female. Many Christian voters agreed, particularly self-identified evangelicals, showing their support for gender binaries at the ballot box. But Ben Dunning, PhD '05, a historian of early Christianity, says the story of religion and gender is more complicated.

"Christianity is so often marshaled in contemporary political debates," he says, "but often with very little knowledge of how incredibly rich and kaleidoscopic the Christian tradition is, especially when it comes to wrestling with sex and gender and desire as difficult questions, difficult parts of the project of being human."

CHRISTIAN FORMATION: As Florence Corliss Lamont Professor of Divinity and Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Harvard Divinity School, Ben Dunning studies sex and gender in texts from the first through the fourth centuries CE—formative years for Christianity as a new movement.

ONE OF MY GOALS is to show that complexity around sex and gender isn't just a modern invention. It has deep roots and has been wrestled with for centuries in theological contexts.

– BENJAMIN DUNNING

As Florence Corliss Lamont Professor of Divinity and Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Harvard Divinity School, Dunning studies sex and gender in texts from the first through the fourth centuries CE—formative years for Christianity as a new movement. He has found that, while gender complexity and instability are frequently mapped as a contemporary development and an import of the ideological left, the truth is far more interesting: early Christian texts saw sexuality and gender not as givens but rather as thorny questions to think through.

Sex as a Question Mark

Dunning's work suggests that Christian notions of gender and sexuality are not fixed, stable truths that transcend time and place, but are rather dependent and contingent on the cultural norms of the society in which they are produced—and that they crop up again and again as open questions.

In his 2011 book, *Specters of Paul: Sexual Difference in Early Christian Thought*, Dunning explores a famous theological construct, put forward by the Apostle Paul. Writing to various early Christian communities, Paul offers them a new way of thinking about what it means to be human. He sets up a framework that spans from Adam as an emblem of creation to Jesus, the second Adam, as an emblem of the end of all things, with humankind poised in the middle.

"The question that emerges is, 'What about Eve?'" remarks Dunning. "What about female bodies? What is their religious legibility in this space that is being determined by two paradigmatic bodies who are, on the one hand, set up as human universals, but on the other hand are male?"

A few generations later, in sermons, commentaries, and other religious texts, early Christian thinkers tried to solve the problem of how women fit into this theological picture in a variety of different ways: from framing female sexual difference as a temporary aberration that would be resolved at the end of time, to creating a parallel framework of paradigmatic female bodies that make reference not to Adam and Christ but rather to Eve and the Virgin Mary.

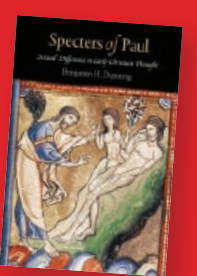
"But none of those solutions that the early Christians come up with fully work," Dunning argues. "None of them fully solve the problem in a coherent, consistent way. They all, in one way or another, unravel on terms internal to their own arguments." For example, around the turn of the third century, the Latin writer Tertullian of Carthage—anxious to preserve the superiority of the Adam-Christ paradigm over Eve-Mary—argues that Christ's virginity is uniquely enduring by insisting, problematically, that Mary lost her virginity when she gave birth to Christ.

"I have become convinced that this unraveling is a kind of intellectual, political, and ethical resource, one that has a lot to teach us about what gender is in the first place," says Dunning. "It's pointing us to something fundamental about the limits of what we can know when it comes to desire and embodiment and sex and sexuality." The unraveling also challenges the assumption that "man" and "woman" are straightforward historical constants—as Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote on his website albertmohler.com, an unchanging sense of "God's design in the biblical concept of manhood and womanhood."

Karen King, Hollis Research Professor of Divinity, affirms that early Christian views of sex and gender were more unsettled than we might think. "In I Corinthians, for example, Paul implies that it is best to avoid marriage, while the writer of I Timothy condemns those who would abstain from marriage as being led by the devil," King points out.

"One of my goals is to show that complexity around sex and

SPECTERS OF PAUL: **Dunning's 2011 book explores the apostle's thinking about what it means to be male, female, and human.**



gender isn't just a modern invention," Dunning says. "It has deep roots and has been wrestled with for centuries in theological contexts."

Challenging the "Clobber Texts"

Dunning's latest book project furthers his exploration of these tensions, focusing on theological arguments against homoeroticism from the first through the fourth centuries, before the fall of the Roman Empire. Many have argued that the Bible condemns homosexuality, typically by citing a specific set of Old and New Testament passages known colloquially as "clobber texts" because they have been used so commonly to assail the legitimacy of same-sex relationships. But Dunning's new project asks how much relevance the concepts in these passages actually have to our contemporary understandings of homosexuality.

Perhaps the most prominent clobber text of all is Romans 1:1:26–27, in which the Apostle Paul references the "degrading passions" of women who "exchanged natural intercourse for

unnatural" and men who "were consumed with passion for one another."

Dunning notes, however, that this passage does not specifically denounce passion between two women; this reference to "unnatural" intercourse could allude to some types of sex between women and men. Moreover, during the Roman era in which Paul wrote this passage, questions around what today we would today call sexuality were far more concerned with issues of status and gender than they were with biological sex. "What they're worried about is not whether it's two men or two women," Dunning explains, "but rather the status of each of the participants and who is doing what to whom."

Indeed, an overriding concern with status rather than biological sex appears again and again in writings dating from the time of early Christianity. Examples are so numerous, Dunning explains, that it would be difficult to catalog them all. But he points to a few as representative: in Plutarch's *Roman Questions*, a first-century explanation of Roman customs, the author suggests that freeborn Roman boys wear amulets because "it was not unseemly or shameful for the men of old to love male slaves who were in their season of youthful beauty . . . but they emphatically kept away from free boys, and free boys bore this sign so men would not be uncertain if they encountered boys naked." Here the status of free boys is a matter of concern—not because they are male but because they will eventually be adult Roman citizens themselves; whereas enslaved men's lack of social status—and lack of control over their own bodies—renders them indifferent, and thus appropriate, as objects of erotic desire, regardless of being male.

Similarly, the first-century philosopher Seneca invokes in his *Dialogues* the image of a strong man whose "sexual integrity is intact, [whose] manhood is safe, [whose] body is open to no shameful submissiveness." In this context, what mattered most was not whether freeborn men were having intercourse with women, but rather whether they were the active, penetrative partner in a sexual encounter—because being the passive, receptive partner was associated with femininity and with lower social rank.

This historical context is essential background for understanding denunciations of same-sex erotic practice in the early Christian theological tradition. "Many of the arguments these theological treatises and sermons are making just don't make any sense outside of a Roman ideological framework," Dunning observes.

Roman views of femininity and its place in the social/sexual hierarchy carry into early Christian theology, which presents a major complication when these texts are evaluated in their original historical context: "While women could and did hold important positions of social influence in the Roman Empire,

on an ideological level—at least in certain ways—ancient Roman culture is misogynist all the way down," Dunning says. "It's about devaluing women. What's problematic for the Romans is that the penetrated or 'passive' partner is behaving like a woman. And that creates an interesting set of tensions when you fast forward into modernity and contemporary religious communities are inheriting this tradition and these texts. They are wrestling with them as authoritative in one way or another, and at the same time, they are seeking to affirm women's full humanity. But one of my arguments is that you can't actually extricate the condemnations of same-sex eros from the fundamental misogyny that animates those arguments."

"The topic of desire is complicated," observes King, whose own work traces the complexity of how early Christian texts frame women and gender. "Women are sometimes shown playing important roles—like Junia the apostle in the Letter to the Romans and Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Mary—or they are silenced, as in I Timothy, which says: 'A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.'"

Interrogating any of the key terms in texts like the Book of Romans—"men," "women," "natural," "unnatural," "passion"—introduces problems and ambiguities, Dunning says, unsettling the foundation of any simplistic assertion that the New Testament has something definitive to say about homosexuality as we would understand and accept it today.

THESE DIVERSE ASPECTS of the early Christian tradition do, I think, show us that identity, when it comes to questions of embodiment and desire and sexual difference, is always going to be an incomplete project—and that there's nothing wrong with that.

—BENJAMIN DUNNING

"These texts don't necessarily work to shore up identities, whether those are heteronormative ones or those of alternative genders and sexualities," Dunning explains. "But whether we're looking at gender-bending in martyr acts, or portrayals of Jesus as feminized, or complicated theological treatises that both value and devalue erotic desire simultaneously, these diverse aspects of the early Christian tradition do, I think, show us that identity, when it comes to questions of embodiment and desire and sexual difference, is always going to be an incomplete project—and that there's nothing wrong with that. They show us that it's actually a beautiful space of possibility, not a problem we have to fix."

Through this work, Dunning is tracing the complex ways that early Christian thinking moves through history and becomes part of our cultural inheritance in the present. He also underscores a powerful broader lesson that the tensions in these ancient texts can teach us. As Dunning puts it, "The right to claim truth about someone else's embodiment and desire isn't one we ever truly have."

Ancient Studies, New Connections

Dunning joined the Harvard Divinity School (HDS) faculty in 2022 after 16 years as a professor at Fordham University. It was a homecoming of sorts. Dunning not only earned his PhD in the study of religion from Harvard but also was a 2009–2010 Women's Studies in Religion Program (WSRP) research associate (RA) at the Divinity School—the first male RA in the program's 35-year history.

During his time at WSRP, Dunning worked on what became *Specters of Paul*. The work is the product of his distinctive and varied research expertise: the history of gender, sexuality, and religion, particularly in early Christianity and the New Testament, as well as critical and feminist theory, queer theory, and hermeneutics.

Dunning says the modern academy has not always been organized to support such diverse research interests—but the landscape is changing.

"Things were more siloed when I was a graduate student," he recalls. "There was religion, there was the classics, there was history. One thing that's very exciting about the community at Harvard is there's a lot of intellectual engagement and cross-fertilization."

Today, Dunning teaches courses offered jointly at HDS and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS). "Sex, Gender, and Sexuality" explores the work of 20th-century thinkers from psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to the philosophers Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. "Histories, Bodies, Differences," co-taught with HDS Professor Amy Hollywood, brings contemporary life and critical theory into conversation with premodern texts and history. In Dunning's view, these courses open crucial intellectual doors for his students.

"I work with so many students, both at the Divinity School and in the FAS, who have complicated relationships to Christianity, to Judaism, to gender and sexuality, and are trying to make sense of that," Dunning says. "Many of my students have found that when it comes to questions of gender, sexuality, and religion, straightforward or facile answers—whether progressive or traditional—have not worked for them. So they want to get into the weeds. They want to work through these questions in their historical and religious dimensions, in their full complexity. I try to create ways that give them that space."

Looking ahead, Dunning hopes his work will enable his students and the public to better understand the complexity of sexuality and gender, and how Christians—both then and now—have rejected simplistic formulations of either.

"To assume that sex and gender are self-evident, and that that has been the position of the New Testament and the Christian tradition monolithically and with a single voice forever, is actually to step away from the tradition," Dunning says. "Through my work, I'm trying to do justice to a tradition that has always been a little bit confounded by issues of what it means to be a body and what it means to desire. These are questions worth wrestling with."

LANDSCAPE PORTRAIT:
At the heart of Voelcker's scholarship is an engagement with land as an ecological, political, and aesthetic terrain.

Reframing the Landscape

ILLUMINATING THE WAY LAND IS PORTRAYED ON FILM—AND THE RELATIONSHIP OF FILMMAKING TO THE LAND.

BY PAUL MASSARI | *Portraits By Jennifer Flynn*

ECCA VOELCKER, PHD '21, GREW UP IN THE ERYRI region of Wales without a television. She didn't need one. A national park, Eryri (or "Snowdonia" in English) is remote and rugged, bordered on the east by mountains and the west by the Irish Sea. Whenever she felt bored indoors, Voelcker would wander through the land. "It was a very free-range childhood," she explains. "The landscape in Eryri is incredibly green and blue. It often resembles a painting."

Voelcker didn't have to walk far, however, to find sights that were much less idyllic. Right outside her house were huge mine shafts and quarry pits, some filled with water and so deep that divers would train in them—scars on the landscape left over from centuries of extractive industry. "Before I'd ever seen 'extractivism' in films and photographs, I'd seen it with my own eyes in the land in front of me," she remembers. "All the 19th-century quarrying left mountains of slate waste across the landscape."

A writer and historian of art, film, and visual culture, Voelcker looks underneath aesthetics to understand the politics, economics, and social

history of extraction and change. Named a 2024 BBC New Generation Thinker by the British Broadcasting Corporation, Voelcker has recently completed her first book, *Land Cinema in an Age of Extraction*, which is forthcoming from the University of California Press. The book "unearths key examples of eco-political counterculture from the 1970s and tries to stimulate visual literacy amongst a generation of readers facing climate breakdown today." At its heart is an engagement with land as an ecological, political, and aesthetic terrain.

A Global Conversation

Voelcker, who lectures in art and film history at Goldsmiths, University of London, coined the term "Land Cinema" to describe filmmaking that understands land as a locus of social and environmental responsibility, and film as a political tool. She sees the genre in conversation with Third Cinema, a movement of the 1960s and 1970s that rejected both a "first cinema" of Hollywood stereotypes and a "second cinema" of the elitist European avant-garde in favor of films that centered anti-colonial and working-class perspectives.

"Third Cinema is often made with or by the people doing the work of resistance themselves," Voelcker says. "Land Cinema is very similar. It emerged during the 1970s, a decade marked by an acceleration in material extraction and increasing environmental consciousness, which drew in turn from feminist and anti-colonial understandings of justice. Land Cinema understands land as an intersection of ecological, political, and aesthetic issues."

Voelcker underscores the global dimensions of Land Cinema with case studies from Japan, Mali, Colombia, North America, and Europe that explore shared but differential relationships to the problem of extraction. Along these lines, two of the many women artists considered in Voelcker's feminist writing of history are the Navajo director Arlene Bowman and the Orkney filmmaker Margaret Tait. "Both women documented their experience of return to landscapes with which they had familial ties but from which they felt distanced," she says. "Both films are 'landscape-portraits' of their makers, the land, and other women they meet there."

Frustrated Idylls

In *Navajo Talking Picture* (1986), Bowman, the first Navajo woman to attend UCLA's film program, returns to a reservation in northern Arizona to film a day in her grandmother's life there. Bowman speaks no Navajo. Her grandmother doesn't speak English and doesn't want to be filmed. The resulting portrait is less than idyllic, which is why the film matters.

"This young woman with her camera wants to take—to extract really—her grandmother's picture," she says. "The grandmother says, 'You don't take our picture in this culture,' and tells Bowman to stop following her. Bowman keeps that tension in the film, frustrating our desire for a lovely, straightforward, rural documentary about her relationship with her grandmother. In so doing, she invites the viewer to consider how she and her ancestors have long been portrayed in Hollywood Westerns that erase the diversity of culture and language among Indigenous people and speak nothing of settler colonialism or genocide."

Margaret Tait had trained at film school in Rome and traveled around the world when she decided to return to the remote Scottish island of Orkney in 1968. *Land Makar* (1981) is Tait's portrait of her neighbor, an independent woman farmer.

A FASCINATING APPROACH: University of Cambridge Professor Victoria Young, says Voelcker's research makes connections that may not at first seem organic or obvious. "Becca's work draws from different sources and materials to create a resonant and self-reflexive approach to scholarship."

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY BECCA VOELCKER

> **[I HAD] A VERY FREE RANGE** childhood. The landscape in Eryri is incredibly green and blue. It often resembles a painting. – BECCA VOELCKER



Tait tries to bridge the gap in class and outlook by telling her neighbor that they are both "poets of the land," Tait by filming it, and her neighbor by cultivating it. The neighbor is unimpressed. "What's fascinating," Voelcker says, "is that Tait retains this tension between herself and her subject in the film, just like Bowman did. There's a feminist politics in this refusal of tidy narrative closures."

Both Bowman and Tait's films are shot in landscapes of rugged beauty. Both confound the viewer's expectations by portraying difficult encounters between two generations and between these insiders and outsiders. Both ask us to look back into film and art history to think about how the land—and its people—have been portrayed in the past.

"In Tait's film, for example, we might think of the 18th-century landscape tradition, when these idylls were painted," Voelcker says. "They were commissioned by landowners who had made their fortune in the transatlantic slave trade. Returning from the Americas, they cleared citizens from land kept as commons for centuries to make way for privately owned sheep pasture serving the wool trade. They painted their newly enclosed landscape in a picturesque aesthetic, but in fact, it was a site of violence. Tait's filmmaking in Orkney invites us to consider this historical aesthetic and its political implications."

Collective Action

In addition to individual filmmakers like Bowman and Tait, Voelcker studies collectives like the one established in Paris during the 1970s by Bouba Touré and more than a dozen of his fellow West Africans. In France, the members of the group had endured poor living and working conditions as well as racism. When drought hit the Sahel region of Africa, the migrants' starving families wrote to say that nothing would grow, not only because of the weather but also due to years of colonial plantation agriculture that had depleted the land. So, the group of 14 workers gave up their factory jobs, went back to their homeland, and established the cooperative Somankidi Coura farm community to help sustain themselves.

Voelcker says that the farm, still in operation with over 300 members, combined self-sufficiency with self-representation. "The thing that fascinates me about the collective is that they used cameras from the minute they began this project," she says. "They were filming themselves, photographing themselves to document what was going on. As they were learning about irrigation and biodiversity, they were also producing their own stories, their own perspectives."

For the Malian collective, filmmaking was itself an act of transgression. "French colonizers had prohibited their West

African subjects from even using a camera," Voelcker notes. Touré also literally transgressed national boundaries, smuggling seeds, ideas, photographs, and energy from one continent to another. "He was showing that these geographies are fundamentally connected," Voelcker says. "It's another example of a filmmaker thinking about their own perspective as it relates to others and communicating this relation through film."

University College London Professor Kristy Sinclair Dootson, a fellow BBC New Generation Thinker, says that Voelcker's work is driven by a series of questions: how can we rethink the ethics of making images of nature in an age of climate crisis? How can artists reposition themselves in relation to the land in a responsible and care-driven, rather than extractive, way? And how can viewers learn to see and think differently about their social and physical surroundings?

"That Becca's work spans so many different geographic areas and types of artistic practice is not merely impressive, but a testament to how pressing these issues are for artists and audiences," Dootson says. "Becca's capacity to engage audiences with these urgent issues has been recognized with her appointment as a BBC New Generation Thinker, confirming her special capacities to explain complex ideas in plain language and through compelling storytelling."

VISIONS OF LAND: (Clockwise from above) A photograph from the Malian Somankidi Coura farm collective; frames from the films of Anne Charlotte Robinson, discussed in Voelcker's book, *Land Cinema*; a still from a Japanese *fūkeiron* film.

Wounded Land

While the term "Land Cinema" may conjure up visions of rural, verdant landscapes, Voelcker notes that most of the world's population lives in cities. Here her work is influenced by the thinking of First Nations theorist and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who argues that humanity should care for and about "wounded land" as well as that which is pristine, beautiful, and green.

"There's so much talk now of ventures that offset carbon emissions with planting monoculture forestry—usually in the Global South," Voelcker explains. "It's a way of repeating age-old cycles of colonial power differentials. By looking at damaged land, we're saying that we can't just push things to another place and only look at green spaces that we have successfully rewilded in London, say, or Boston. Those initiatives are great but focusing only on them misses the full picture."

In search of a fuller picture, Voelcker returned to Japan, where she had lived before Harvard. There, she researched a group of radical filmmakers, activists, and photographers in Tokyo who pioneered a new way of looking at urban environments during the 1970s. Through grainy black-and-white photographs and experimental films, the artists depicted the "economic miracle" of postwar Japan as a blur of concrete, traffic, and pollution. "They called it *fūkeiron*, which means 'landscape theory,'" Voelcker says. "At the time Japan was promoting itself as this epicenter of technological advancement and growth. These images produced on film and also in some interesting essays presented the fallout from this progress, which might have been good for GDP but not for the Earth, the farmers, and citizens of the land."

Landscape for the *fūkeiron* filmmakers and photographers was not green or pastoral; it was a diagram of socioeconomic and political power. "They filmed it like it was a crime scene," Voelcker says.

BY LOOKING AT DAMAGED LAND, we're saying that we can't just push things to another place and only look at green spaces that we have successfully rewilded in London, say, or Boston. Those initiatives are great but focusing only on them misses the full picture.

– BECCA VOELCKER

"The whole of Japan had been transformed into copies of Tokyo, controlling and regulating everyone."

University of Cambridge Professor Victoria Young, a scholar of modern and contemporary Japanese literature and Japanese cinema, says Voelcker's approach is fascinating because it makes connections that may not at first seem organic or obvious. "Becca's work draws from different sources and materials to create a resonant and self-reflexive approach to scholarship," Young says. "However, as her explorations root themselves in the land and the ravages that modern life have wrought upon it, they also bear witness to a universal fate whose multiple inflections are far from contrasting but rather, offer multiple responses that are each, equally vital for understanding the problem of environmental collapse and for laying the groundwork towards—perhaps, one hopes—future, possible solutions."

Back to the Cinema

Collectively, Voelcker's diverse cinematic explorations speak to the need for a multifaceted understanding of land, identity, and power. Her work, grounded in a personal narrative of place and history, offers new insights into filmmaking as an act of resistance and reclamation. Writing *Land Cinema* became both a scholarly endeavor and a journey to reconcile her own position within the broader landscape of social justice.

"The more I delved into these films, the more I reflected on my upbringing in Wales," she confides. "Attending a monthly film screening of world cinema organized by volunteers in a local cinema inspired a lifelong intrigue with how different cultures picture 'us' and how they relate to the land they inhabit. Later, the Harvard Film Archive became a second home for me, its treasure of films opening my eyes to many more cultures and ways of seeing."

In that context, it's no surprise, perhaps, that Voelcker's next book project, tentatively titled *A History of Us in Images*, turns to the complexities of identity and belonging. At a time of stark cultural divides and the need for collective climate action, she asks the pressing question: What does "we" mean?

Dr. Edgar Schmitz, director of the MPhil/PhD Art Research Programme in the Department of Art at Goldsmiths, says that his colleague's work is broadening the reach of their department's expertise, becoming an important reference point for other forward-thinking work. "Becca's intimate knowledge of historical and current practices at the intersection of aesthetics and activism, as well as her detailed understanding of East Asia in particular, have allowed us to host research in those fields that we would otherwise simply not be able to support adequately," he says. "Her work resonates deeply with ongoing staff research in art and ecology, climate justice and filmic aesthetics, and is already having a profound impact on our teaching across undergraduate, postgraduate-taught, and doctoral programs."

Through her work, Voelcker not only critiques historical and cinematic narratives but also provides a vital toolset for interpreting contemporary visual culture. Her exploration offers a tableau for understanding how images shape our worldviews, and how storytelling can unravel or reinforce existing power structures. *Land Cinema* precedes a moment of global reflection, prompting readers to see the world—and their place within it—through a lens of informed empathy and critical inquiry.

Gauging the "Pygmalion Effect"

NINA BEGUŠ EXPLORES THE WAY THAT CULTURAL TROPES SHAPE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE—AND REVEAL THE CREATIVE LIMITS OF AI

BY PAUL MASSARI

He made, with marvelous art, an ivory statue,
As white as snow, and gave it greater beauty
Than any girl could have, and fell in love
With his own workmanship.

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

ALIENATED BY THE independence and power of the women in his community, a man creates an artificial mate and then falls in love with her. This ancient myth from Cyprus has persisted in different forms and genres through the centuries, from the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in 8 CE, to George Bernard Shaw's 1913 play *Pygmalion*, to the 1990 hit film *Pretty Woman*. Today, Nina Beguš, PhD '20, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California, Berkeley's Center for Science,

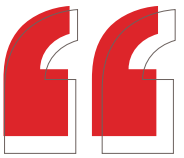
REAL GENIUS: Beguš's book, ***Artificial Humanities***, which will be published in fall 2025, explores how the humanities—literature, history, and art—can deepen our understanding of artificial intelligence and its development.

Technology, Medicine, and Society, sees the "Pygmalion myth" at the core of a technology that is rapidly changing the way humans live and work: artificial intelligence (AI).

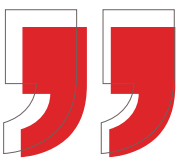
"There's the creation of the artificial human, the ideal woman," Beguš explains. "There's also this element of falling in love with her. That's the trope. And I noticed with the first virtual assistants like Apple's Siri that these were not just mere search. Because the search engine operated through speech, people tried to be more relational with them. It was very similar to what I saw in fiction."

Beguš's observations led her to conduct groundbreaking research on the way that human beings and artificial intelligence create. Using the Pygmalion myth as a prompt, she conducted an experiment that asked both human subjects and large language models (LLMs) to write stories. Her findings indicate that flesh and blood still has an edge over digital when it comes to imagination. They also suggest that the humanities, mostly left out of AI development, make crucial contributions to our understanding of machine learning and its cultural capabilities.

LOVELY MYTHS: (above) Early in the 20th century, the French sculptor Auguste Rodin portrayed his mythological progenitor, Pygmalion, who fell in love with a female figure he carved out of marble. Around the same time, George Bernard Shaw retold Ovid's centuries-old myth in his play, *Pygmalion*, the basis for the Broadway musical, *My Fair Lady*. Audrey Hepburn (right) famously portrayed the show's female protagonist, Eliza Doolittle. Decades later, technologists named one of the first chatbots "Eliza."



BOTH HUMAN WRITERS AND GPT easily followed the typical features of the prompt, demonstrating the pervasiveness of the Pygmalion myth in our cultural imaginary. But large language models, which had memorized voluminous works of fiction based on the story, generated narratives that were formulaic. – NINA BEGUŠ



Less Human than Human

With an eye on AI ethics, Beguš designed an experiment to gauge the societal biases and cultural specifics embedded in LLMs. She asked 250 people through Amazon's Mechanical Turk service and LLMs GPT-3.5, GPT-4, and Llama 3 to write a story based on a human who falls in love with an artificial human—essentially, the Pygmalion myth. Beguš chose crowdworkers—remote workers who perform small tasks—rather than professional writers because she was interested in the "averageness" of their narrative response.

When she analyzed the results, Beguš found that "both human writers and GPT easily followed the typical features of the prompt, demonstrating the pervasiveness of the Pygmalion myth in our cultural imaginary." But large language models, which had memorized voluminous works of fiction based on the story, generated narratives that were formulaic. "They have an inner structure, and they follow it paragraph by paragraph," Beguš says. "They were also bereft of local and cultural specificity. They wrote about utopian cities, but if you pushed them a little bit into ethnicity or culture, LLMs gave you a very stereotypical description. Generally, you got a single flavor of the prompt."

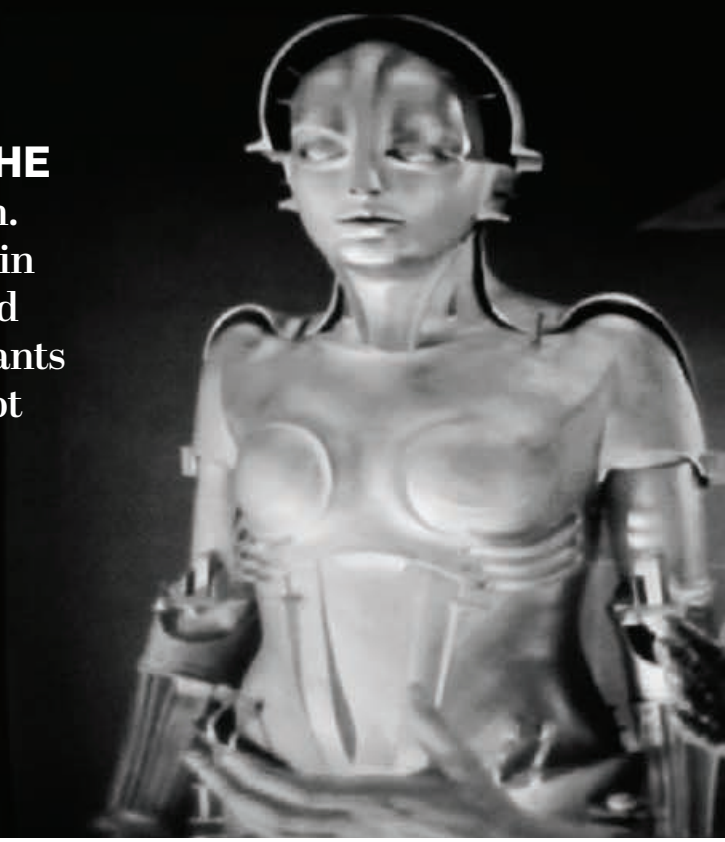
Human participants, on the other hand, drew upon a vast reservoir of implicit cultural knowledge, crafting narratives rich with personal and collective experience. They also showed greater thematic variation and creativity. "Most stories [authored by humans] primarily dealt with romantic love and secondarily with its unconventionality," Beguš wrote in her paper, "Experimental Narratives: A Comparison of Human Crowdsourced Storytelling and AI Storytelling." "Following the cluster of motifs around the Pygmalion myth known from literature, only the human-authored stories additionally thematized loneliness, loss supplanted with doppelgangers, obsession with creating artificial life, serendipitous innovation, violence towards humans and towards humanoids, societal disapproval, and change."

Beguš was perhaps most surprised to see how forward-thinking LLMs were in terms of gender and sexuality, an indication of the way that the models aligned with the values of their creators. "Newer language models became more progressive, not only in comparison to older models but also in comparison to humans in the experiment," she says. "This is also where the innovation in story happened—at the level of friendship and polyamory."

The takeaway for those building large language models is that, while current LLMs have a greater capacity for alignment and coherence, their creativity is limited. It's instructive, Beguš says, that poets enjoyed earlier versions of GPT more than later ones. "They had way more fun with GPT-2.0 because it was not as aligned," she says. "It was a little chaotic. It would assemble a string of words that you wouldn't usually put together. You kind of want that element for creativity."

Professor Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, director of the Center for Language Generation and AI at Aarhus University in Denmark says Beguš's work takes scholars and scientists beyond speculation about the differences between the writing of machines and humans but produces and evaluates newly written stories. "Nina's research has shown the strengths and weaknesses of what humans and machines can do," he says. "Her background in comparative literature is essential in ensuring that quantitative studies are also put to the eye test."

> **THERE'S THE CREATION OF THE** artificial human, the ideal woman. There's also this element of falling in love with her. That's the trope. And I noticed with the first virtual assistants like Apple's Siri that these were not just mere search. – NINA BEGUŠ



Bringing the Human to the Artificial

Beguš came to work at the intersection of the humanities and technology shortly after she enrolled at Harvard Griffin GSAS in 2014. Fascinated by the Pygmalion myth, she had decided to center her research on a Silk Road iteration of the trope. Around the same time, she noticed a modern version of the story in critically acclaimed movies, particularly Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014), where the companions were conjured not out of ivory but artificial intelligence.

"I was just astonished that this millennia-old narrative still had such a profound impact on our imaginative landscape," Beguš says. "This was also the time when we were following all these breakthroughs in natural language processing and computer vision. I started wondering, why did they coincide so much? Why are technologists following these fictional scripts?"

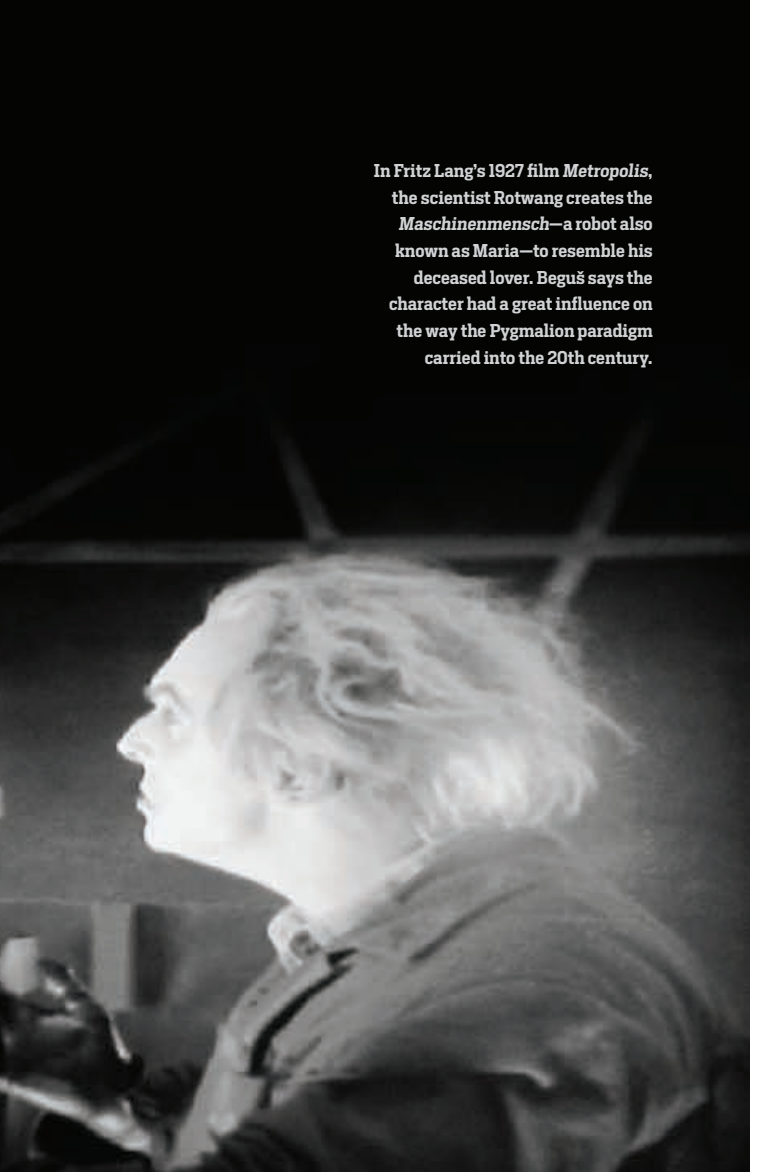
The early 2010s were a time of breakthroughs in natural language processing. Virtual assistants like Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa had started to launch. Beguš noticed that all were voiced as women, harking back to the Pygmalion myth. She began talking to engineers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology working in affective computing—how to instill mimicry of emotions into machines—and found her observations struck a chord.

"They said, 'We need your help with solving these issues,'" Beguš remembers. "And I realized they were asking the same questions while building these robots that I was asking in my research. It's why I argue that humanistic knowledge and insights should be a part of the building process of these technologies."

Beguš's colleague Ted Underwood, a professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, says what's distinctive about her work is that she's "acutely aware" of the interaction between AI and human culture.

"When Nina studies language models as storytellers, she's

PHOTOGRAPHY: WIKI COMMONS



In Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*, the scientist Rotwang creates the *Maschinenmensch*—a robot also known as Maria—to resemble his deceased lover. Beguš says the character had a great influence on the way the Pygmalion paradigm carried into the 20th century.

interested in how they remix narrative templates like the Pygmalion myth," he explains. "In some ways, a language model's treatment of Pygmalion is very formulaic, but in other ways, the stories created by models can innovate—for instance, by casting more characters as women than human writers typically do. On another level, she's interested in the way fiction shapes our perception of AI—pushing us to imagine models, for instance, as things that either are autonomous agents, or ought to be and are falling short of that ideal. This bidirectional research agenda is still unusual, but I think Nina is blazing a path that many others will follow in years to come."

Beyond Mimicry

Today, Beguš's contribution extends beyond experimental research into the conceptual realm of a new field she calls "artificial humanities." This interdisciplinary framework advocates for integrating humanistic inquiry—encompassing literature, history, and ethics—into the technology development process. "We cannot really understand and interpret AI without understanding and interpreting humans," she says. "By applying these humanistic insights, technology can become more aligned with the nuanced needs of society."

Beguš's approach also translates into practical engagement. She has recently collaborated with tech giants and startups alike, providing a humanistic lens on technology development. "I was really surprised how welcome our contributions were in most circles," she noted. Through these partnerships, Beguš hopes to shift the dynamics, aiming for a balance where humanities inform and critique technology, and vice versa.

Bernard Geoghegan, reader in the history and theory of digital media at King's College, London, says that Beguš's work goes beyond positioning the humanities in an age of STEM. "She excavates the messy and interwoven rapports among fields such as literature, engineering, computing, and theater, showing how they have always grappled with shared problems of modeling and molding artificial worlds. In so doing, Beguš positions humanistic research to respond to the challenges of a postindustrial society, where technics inflects nearly all aspects of human life."

Looking forward, Beguš envisions a future where AI can break free from the constraints of human mimicry to explore new potentials beyond imitation. This involves leveraging AI not just as a tool but as a partner in creative and intellectual exploration. Referencing AlphaGo, a computer program developed by Google DeepMind in London that made unexpected and creative moves in the board game Go, Beguš asserts, "there was this novelty that the machine could provide. I think that's the real value. It's not the human mimicry. That's kind of uninspiring."

Beguš argues that understanding cultural imaginaries is critical in developing ethical AI. She observes that much of the technology's development has been guided by cultural constructs embedded within stories and myths, often unconsciously. Her perspective encourages us to ask: What cultural values are embedded within our technologies, and how do they reflect or distort human experience?

"The paper has really proved thaty . . . people might not know what the Pygmalion myth is, but when I gave them a basic prompt, they were all able to follow it," she says. "So, our interactions with AI are scaffolded by deeply entrenched cultural narratives which then show up in the technology. It's kind of a bizarre situation. I think this is something I'm going to be researching for the rest of my life."

GENIUS SELECTION

Martha Muñoz, PhD '14, biology, was named a 2024 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellow last fall in recognition of her research on how species adapt to different environments and circumstances. Often referred to as a "genius grant," the fellowship supports the Yale University professor's extraordinary work, which reveals that organisms are endowed with the capacity to shape not just the types of selection they experience, but also the intensity of that selection through their behavior. "Simply by altering when they're active, where they're active, who they interact with," Muñoz says, "organisms can in some cases shield themselves from natural selection. Conversely, organisms can also expose themselves to natural selection by interacting with new resources and entering new environments, accelerating evolutionary change. It's very much a two-way street."

••• **Learn more about Muñoz's research at** *gsas.harvard.edu/news/new-take-natural-selection.*

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY JOHN D. AND CATHERINE T. MACARTHUR FOUNDATION

Michael Anne Kyle, PhD '21, health policy, was named a 2024 Wunderkind by the health, medicine, and life sciences journalism site STAT last fall. The list recognizes "the unheralded heroes of science and medicine, poring over hundreds of nominations from across North America in search for the next generation of scientific superstars."

Julia Gonski, PhD '19, physics, received a grant from the US Department of Energy's (DOE) Early Career Research Program for her cutting-edge work advancing microelectronics and machine learning to help hunt for new physics. The award supports outstanding early career scientists performing research that supports the DOE Office of Science mission.

Michael N. Hall, PhD '81, microbiology & molecular genetics, received the Balzan Prize for his contributions to the understanding of the molecular mechanisms that regulate cell growth and aging. Endowed with 750,000 Swiss francs each, the prizes are awarded to scholars and scientists who have distinguished themselves in their fields on an international level.

Anna Huang, PhD '19, computer science, joined MIT's departments of electrical engineering and computer science and music and theater arts as an assistant professor. She will help develop graduate programming focused on music technology.

Karl Haushalter, PhD '01, chemistry, was named Harvey Mudd College's next vice president for academic affairs. As chair of the school's Department of Chemistry, Haushalter has enhanced student involvement and secured significant philanthropic support for departmental initiatives. He begins his new role effective July 1, 2025.

Scott Newstok, PhD '02, English and American literature and language, was appointed inaugural executive director of the Spence Wilson Center for Interdisciplinary Humanities at Rhodes College last fall. The center will gather faculty, students, visiting scholars, and community members to address complex global questions through humanistic inquiry.

Kenneth L. Taylor, PhD '68, history of science, emeritus professor at the University of Oklahoma, was presented the Vladimir V. Tikhomirov History of Geology Award for 2024. Established in 2012 by the International Union of Geological Sciences, the Tikhomirov Medal is awarded once every four years for scientific contributions and achievements in the field.

Natasha Warikoo, PhD '05, sociology (pictured), **Anthony Abraham Jack**, PhD '16, sociology, and **Matthew Clair**, PhD '18, sociology, were all recognized with the Eastern Sociological Society's Public Sociology Award for "cutting-edge sociological research" and "meaningful public work using that research."

PHOTOGRAPHERS: PERELMAN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA (KYLE); THE ARC CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE FOR DARK MATTER PARTICLE PHYSICS (GONSKI); WIKI COMMONS (HALL); COURTESY HARVEY MUDD COLLEGE (HAUSHALTER); HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION (WARIKOO)

AUTHOR PROFILE

COMPLEX RECIPE

The history of the Caribbean over the last 500 years is often portrayed as one of colonization versus liberation. In her new book, Culinary Colonialism, Caribbean Cookbooks, and Recipes of National Independence, *Salem State University Professor Keja Valens, PhD '04, looks at the region and its people through a more complex lens. By exploring the food and food practices of the Caribbean, Valens lays bare both the atrocities of settler colonialism and the multiple inheritances that frustrate a neat moral ordering of the region's culture.*

How do Caribbean cookbooks transcend cooking instructions to become a "vast, varied, and a vital mode" of expression?
From the 19th century to the mid-20th century, most of the cooking in Caribbean countries was done by people who learned through oral and practical transmission and were often illiterate. Even in the 20th century, when literacy expanded, many who owned cookbooks also would employ cooks. Few people who read the books cooked from them. Then, even if you did read the books and tried to follow the recipes, you might not end up with anything edible because their function was really to convey ideas about how to make a dish that were already known to the people preparing it. So, what these cookbooks really did was represent their countries and cultures as distinct and independent rather than as colonies. If you called your recipe Jamaican, you were saying there was such a thing as Jamaican cookery.

For instance, there's one early 20th-century cookbook written by a Frenchwoman about the French Antilles. In it, she claims bananas originated in France. So, when another cookbook comes along and says, "Bananas and plantains came to the Caribbean with African slaves," the writers are saying, "This culture comes not only from Indigenous people, not only from European colonizers, but also from Africa, and our culinary traditions are a product of that mixture."

Your book discusses the tropes of scarcity and danger, abundance and edibleness in the first writing about Caribbean food and food practices. How do they emerge?
Christopher Columbus and Diego Álvarez Chanca, the doctor who accompanied him on his second voyage to the Caribbean, both wrote chronicles and letters. They knew the principle of *terra nullius*:

"Just to say, 'This is Creole food. It belongs to us,' doesn't erase the problematic legacy of bringing unhealthy things to the Caribbean and forcing people to eat them."

PHOTOGRAPHER: TONY RINALDO

if you arrived somewhere and there was no culture, then it was blank ground and you could claim it for your country. For instance, they wrote home about having found pots full of human bones. Now, there is no evidence to suggest that Indigenous people in the Caribbean were practicing cannibalism. They were eating animals—including large, big-boned sea animals. But among the first things Columbus and Chanca wrote was basically, "There's no culture here and the people are cannibals." That's the danger trope. They didn't recognize the farming or cooking practices of the indigenous people except as savage.

One example of the scarcity trope had to do with bread. For the Spanish and other Europeans, bread was food. So, when they didn't find any in the Caribbean islands, they wrote home that there was no food there. Columbus and Chanca's correspondence was used by other Europeans who wrote histories of the New World but never went there. They just repeated what the letters said. So, there was a lot of power in those few chronicles that came back across the ocean.

As much as Columbus and Chanca needed to find no culture or civilization with a claim to the land, they also needed to find valuable things to expropriate and send back to the Queen of Spain so she would keep funding their voyages. The Caribbean is a tropical zone. There are a lot of fruits and vegetables that grow there. In the 1500s the soil quality was much better than it is now because it hadn't been destroyed by plantation agriculture. So they wrote back that the Caribbean was the Garden of Eden. That's part of the edibleness trope, as if all these foods were given by God rather than cultivated by humans. It went along with the idea that "We're the men meant to come here and impregnate, eat, take up, consume, and then render civilized this natural bounty."

Finally, what is the process of "creolization" you say guides your analysis of Caribbean cookbooks? How does it frustrate attempts at a "neat moral ordering" of the region's culture?

Creole originally meant being born in a place. Up through the 19th century, the term was used to talk about people who were of single ancestry but born in the Caribbean. By the 19th century, though, a lot of folks who were born in the Caribbean had multiple ancestries, as did the plants and animals. And so Creole took on a new meaning.

That creolization is reflected in food and food practices. The Spaniards brought pigs that decimated the yuca and cassava, staple foods for the indigenous people. But over the years, pigs were indigenized and became part of the regional diet themselves. Today, empanadas or patties, which often use pig fat and pork as well as white flour, are considered a classic Caribbean dish.

Now, many Caribbean people thinking about food today are concerned about nutritional issues with all that white flour and pig fat. So just to say, "This is Creole food. It belongs to us," doesn't erase the problematic legacy of bringing unhealthy things to the Caribbean and forcing people to eat them. But it does allow for thinking about this complicated process of coming together in ways that are lovely as well as fraught. After all, who doesn't enjoy a good empanada?

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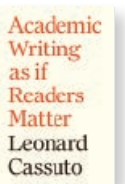

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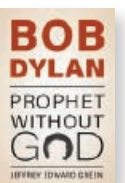

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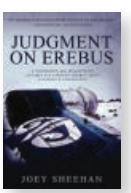

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Join Us for Alumni Day in Cambridge, MA!

SATURDAY, APRIL 5, 2025, CAMBRIDGE MA

Alumni Day brings together alumni and Harvard faculty to reconnect with the intellectual life of the University, renew old friendships, and build new ones. This year, you can engage with distinguished scholars and scientists, fellow graduates, and current students about groundbreaking research, including:

David Charbonneau, PhD '01, on "The Terrestrial Worlds of Other Stars"

Charrise Barron, PhD '17, on "The Platinum Age of Gospel Music"

Tarun Khanna, PhD '93, on "Making Meritocracy"

Julia Minson on "Productive Conversations Across Conflict and The Behavioral Science of Disagreement"

Tracy Young-Pearse, PhD '04, on "Unraveling the Molecular Roads Leading to Alzheimer's Disease to Enhance the Design of Targeted Therapies"

In addition, Dean **Emma Dench** will share an update on the early insights from the GAGE implementation process.

FRIDAY, APRIL 4, 2025, PRE-ALUMNI DAY DINNER

In addition to all the Saturday activities there will be a pre-Alumni Day Dinner and viewing of the night sky at the Harvard College Observatory!

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April 5, 2025 Harvard University, Cambridge Campus

●●● **Learn more at *gsas.harvard.edu/alumniday***

Join Dean Emma Dench This Summer in Greece!

SATURDAY, JULY 12, AND SUNDAY, JULY 13, 2025, NAFPLIO GREECE

Please join Dean Emma Dench in Nafplio, Greece for a weekend of events, including touring archeological sites and museums, seeing a performance at the ancient theatre of Epidaurus, hearing a discussion on "Gods and Empire in Ancient Rome and Early China" from Dean Emma Dench and Harvard College Professor Michael Puett, as well as opportunities to connect with fellow alumni.

●●● **Learn more at *gsas.harvard.edu/nafplioweekend***

SAVE THE DATES!

Virtual Event with Anthony Abraham Jack, PhD '16, on "Class Dismissed: When Colleges Ignore Inequality"
March 20, 2025

Pre-Alumni Day Dinner, Cambridge
April 4, 2025

Harvard Horizons, Cambridge and live-streamed
April 8, 2025

Dean Dench and Eric Maskin, PhD '76, in New York City on "How Election Reform Can Help Depolarize Politics in the US"
April 30, 2025

Centennial Medals Ceremony, Cambridge and live-streamed
May 28, 2025

All-Harvard Alumni Day, Cambridge
June 6, 2025

Alumni Weekend in Nafplio, Greece
July 12 & 13, 2025

●●● **More details at:**
gsas.harvard.edu/calendar

PHOTOGRAPHERS: TONY RINALDO (ALUMNI DAY); FLORIAN AUGUSTIN/SHUTTERSTOCK IMAGES (GREECE)

SUPPORTING NEXT-GENERATION SCHOLARS

"Our graduate school experience was truly life-changing, and we feel like we owe a lot to Harvard," says Harry Archerman PhD '13.

He and his wife, Michelle PhD '13, met on their second day at Harvard. In less than five months, they were married. "Our naive optimism led us to contemplate when we could start a family while pursuing graduate degrees," Michelle says. They decided to ask their advisors for guidance.

"We were so nervous," adds Harry, "but both of our advisors turned out to be very supportive." This support was essential as they became parents to three boys while earning their PhDs—Harry in applied physics and Michelle in molecular and cellular biology.

The Archermans' gratitude extended well into their professional lives. "Without the eye-opening experience that Harvard provided, I would never have considered an investment career. And without the support I received from the Harvard ecosystem, I wouldn't have been able to start my firm," Harry shares. Michelle considers her 11 years doing cutting-edge research in pediatric oncology as a career highlight.

The couple have been generous and consistent donors to the Graduate School Fund and recently established a graduate research fellowship. "Graduate students need funds and support," says Harry. "We believe in the transformative impact of a Harvard education."

WHERE SCHOLARSHIP AND INNOVATION MEET

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