



French Department Newsletter March 2025

Bonjour ! This has been another busy year, and below you'll get a glimpse of some of the events and activities we've been engaged in. We have enjoyed a productive relationship with the [French Consulate in San Francisco](#), the [France-Berkeley Fund](#), the [Center of Excellence of French and Francophone Studies](#) (led by **Claire Tourmen**), and the [Center for Interdisciplinary Critical Inquiry](#) (led by **Debarati Sanyal**). Our [Internship Program](#) that offers the possibility of earning a certificate in French for Professional Purposes has continued to attract strong student interest, and our [Summer in Paris Program](#) is thriving under the leadership of **Daniel Hoffmann**.

Despite the worrisome decline in language study nationwide, we have managed to maintain better enrollments than many of our peer departments at other universities (see Undergraduate Happenings below). This is no doubt due to our outstanding faculty, but also to the dedicated and innovative efforts of Director of the Language Program **Vesna Rodic** and Undergraduate Advisor **Nina Rennert-Cohen**. Thanks to Head Graduate Advisor **Susan Maslan** and Graduate Student Affairs Officer **Pichaya Kositsawat**, our graduate program also continues to thrive, with five new graduate students this year and an increase in applications for next year's cohort.

This will be my last newsletter, as I will step down as Chair and pass the baton to Professor **Nicholas Paige** this summer. Nick has long previous experience as Chair, and we look forward to his able leadership. -RK

EVENTS

Since last year's newsletter the French Department has hosted over 30 lectures, conferences, seminars, workshops or other events—all of these can be found on our website in our [Events archive](#). Here are a few highlights:

The Department recently welcomed Professors **Robert Schwartzwald** (U. de Montréal) and **Sherry Simon** (Concordia U.) to discuss their anthology of writing by Édouard Roditi, *Worldwise* (McGill-Queen's UP, 2024). A published surrealist poet by age eighteen, Roditi would become an interpreter at the Nuremberg trials, a highly regarded literary translator, a contributor to many LGBTQ publications from *Arcadie* to *Gay Sunshine*, and a perceptive social analyst whose outspoken views irritated American, Soviet, and French authorities by turns. Among those in attendance were local members of Roditi's family.



Professor **Anaïs Maurer** (Rutgers U.) gave this year's Rex Lecture on her recent book, *The Ocean on Fire: Pacific Stories from Nuclear Survivors and Climate Activists* (Duke UP, 2024). The Rex Lecture, in honor of our late colleague **Ted Rex**, is organized each year by our graduate students.

Professor **Soumaya Mestiri** from the Université de Tunis gave a reading and discussion of her book *Pour un féminisme décentré. Recadrer, Résister* as well as a talk entitled: "On Avoiding Both Misunderstandings and Traps: Feminism and Decolonisation in North Africa."

Professor **Hélène Bilis** of Wellesley College (and a 2008 PhD from the UCB French Department) gave this year's Distinguished Alumnæ.i Lecture: "On Refusing Retirement: Age, Ageism, and the Legacy of 'Old Corneille.'"



Nick Paige with Hélène Bilis

French-Cambodian author, actor, and filmmaker **Jean-Baptiste Phou** gave a reading from his recently translated memoir, *Coming Out of My Skin*, as well as a screening of his stage adaptation of *L'anarchiste*, a novel by Cambodian author Soth Polin, followed by conversation with Professors **Karl Britto** and **Penny Edwards** (South and Southeast Asian Studies).

The [Center for Interdisciplinary Critical Inquiry](#), led by **Debarati Sanyal**, in collaboration with the Department of Rhetoric presented a two-day conference entitled, "[Jean-Luc Nancy: Antiquity and Beyond](#)," featuring talks by an array of local, national, and international scholars, with the participation of **Henry Ravenhall**, **Damon Young**, and **Debarati Sanyal**. Toward the end of this semester (April 25-26), CICI will host a conference entitled "[Bordered Life and the Right to Move](#)."

Also in April, the French Department will host French journalist and author **Doan Bui** on April 8 and on April 15, **Nick Paige** and a cast of undergraduate students will present the Spring Play: Molière's *George Dandin ou le mari confondu*.

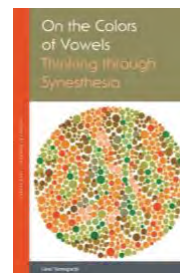
PEOPLE

Currently finishing her dissertation, **Amber Sweat** will start as an Assistant Professor of French and Francophone Studies at Amherst College this fall. Amber recently presented on the sonic and sublimation in *Saint Omer* at the Pacific and Ancient Modern Language Association (with co-panelists **Maya Sidhu** and **Damon Young**). She also chaired a panel at the MLA in New Orleans on “Visualizing Children in Conflict.” Last summer, Amber published in *Qui Parle* on Christina Sharpe’s *Ordinary Notes*, breath, and black life. She has forthcoming publications in *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* and MIT Press’ collection, *Color Protocols: Technologies of Racial Encoding*. Further, she is also preparing a public-facing piece on reddit’s *r/BooksThatFeelLikeThis* as well as two articles: one on black girls’ touchscreen cultures and the other on the home video in *Saint Omer*, both set for circulation this summer. Before taking off to Amherst, she plans to spend some time in Berkeley as well as Paris (research), Aubervilliers (research), and Florence (fun!) Congratulations Professor Sweat!

Also graduating this year, **Alexis Stanley** was selected from a pool of 915 applicants for a 3-year postdoctoral fellowship with Columbia University’s Society of Fellows. Bravo, Alexis! In addition to working on getting her dissertation finished, she has been working on several articles, gave a presentation at the MLA in January, and is developing a new course for the French Department at Columbia. Off campus, Alexis has been teaching at Berkeley City Ballet and Berkeley Ballet Theater this year.

Debarati Sanyal, with colleagues **Judith Butler**, and **Shannon Jackson** were awarded a \$2.6 million grant from the Mellon Foundation to support a groundbreaking multi-year initiative titled “A Counter-Imaginary in Authoritarian Times.” This project will involve collaborative workshops, conferences, performances, publications, and creation of a dynamic, open-ended digital platform, and will bring together academics, artists, activists, and other community members to develop concrete strategies, tools, and proposals to create a counter-imaginary to authoritarianism.

Liesl Yamaguchi's book *On the Colors of Vowels: Thinking Through Synesthesia* appeared with Fordham University Press in January 2025. Read an interview with Prof. Yamaguchi about the book (amongst other things!) [here](#). Liesl will also give a Townsend Center Book Chat about the book on Wednesday, April 9.



Susan Maslan was awarded a grant from the [Berkeley Liberty Initiative \(BLI\)](#) to adapt her Spring 2025 French 43B course (Long Live the Revolution: 1789; 1848; 1968) to help students develop the skills for respectful dialogue and constructive engagement with controversial ideas.

Timothy Hampton recently gave a keynote address to FISIER, an international organization in support of early modern studies on the future of the field. In January he taught a course about Bob Dylan online at the 92nd Street Y in New York. He is currently serving as interim co-chair of the emerging Berkeley Translation Initiative. His newest book, *Trespassing: A Story of Family, Poverty, and Education in the American Desert*, is expected later this year.

Will Burton recently gave a talk entitled “Rousseau at the lesbian bar: Sources of Wittig's critique of the social sciences” at the annual meeting of the UK Society for French Studies in Stirling, Scotland. The talk situated Wittig’s use of Rousseau’s social contract theory alongside other lesbian, feminist

and gay activists calling for the abolition of sexual categories by drawing on movement ephemera and journals. Will also spoke at the UC Berkeley Learning in Retirement program (“Before Sex: Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the unnaturalness of sex, love, and marriage”) and published an article, “Structuralist or Lesbian: Claude Lévi-Strauss and Monique Wittig on Rousseau’s ‘Science’” in the journal *Modern Intellectual History* on the divergences and convergences in Lévi-Strauss and Wittig’s interpretations of Rousseau in the context of social-scientific debates in the postwar period.

Nicholas Paige has been presenting and publishing pieces related to a still-to-be-written book on new ways of modeling change in literary (and other cultural) artifacts “at scale,” that is, over long periods that don’t lend themselves to the ways we usually think about relations between literature and history. Last spring he organized a workshop at Berkeley that brought together an international group of scholars to campus around the problem. And this spring, as mentioned earlier, he’s directing another play for our undergraduates, Molière’s *George Dandin*.

Henry Ravenhall has published articles in *Anglia*, *Medioevo Romanzo*, and *Romania*, and, with Andrew James Johnston and Wolfram R. Keller, has co-edited a special issue of *Anglia* on “Touching Troy,” a series of studies about the role of touch in the reception of the Trojan legend in medieval and early modern Europe. He has presented work-in-progress at meetings of the Medieval Academy of America (University of Notre Dame), Society for French Studies (University of Stirling), and the International Arthurian Society (Université d’Aix-Marseille). In July and December 2024, he carried out manuscript research at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris for his book projects. His most recent classes are on medieval French literature, French ecocriticism, and a graduate seminar on theories of touch.

Déborah Blocker was elected *Deputata straniera* of the *Deputazione di storia patria per la Toscana*, a public society of historians and archivists of Florence and Tuscany founded in 1862. The society regularly honors foreign scholars of Tuscany whose research it deems important by asking them to join its [ranks](#). This past January, Déborah presented elements of her current book project before the [Groupe de Recherches Interdisciplinaires sur l’Histoire du Littéraire](#) at the École des Hautes Études en Science Sociales in Paris (“Histoires, représentations, discours: le mausolée d’Henri II de Montmorency dans la chapelle la Visitation de Moulins (1632-1666)”). This summer, Déborah will research the correspondence of Maria Felice Orsini, duchess of Montmorency (1600-1666), with her Roman relatives (currently housed in the *Archivio Storico Capitolino* in Rome).



The duke of Montmorency, beheaded by order of Louis XIII in 1632.

Michael Lucey’s translation of Didier Eribon's book, [The Life, Old Age, and Death of a Working-Class Woman](#), is being published next month by Penguin in the UK and Semiotext(e) in the US. Michael has published three articles in the past year: “Translation and Polylinguaging: Sexuality and Novels from James Baldwin to Mohamed Mbougar Sarr” in [Comparative Literature](#); “Understanding ‘understanding music’ in Proust” in [Textual Practices](#); and “From Phonemes and Sonemes to Qualia, Aspects, and Collateral Observation” in a special issue of the [American Book Review](#) on “Listening.” This spring Michael will be working on finishing up his latest book, called *Thinking about Sexuality with Novels*, and working on a new translation of André Gide's *The Counterfeiters*. He is looking forward to being on sabbatical next spring and spending the semester at All Souls College in Oxford.

Damon Young recently conducted two Q&A’s with Academy Award-winning filmmaker Todd Haynes [at BAMPEA](#), accompanying screenings of his landmark films *Velvet Goldmine* and *I’m Not There* (the original Dylan film, before *A Complete Unknown*!). With Stephen Best and Mia You, Young

co-edited a special issue of *Representations* (168.1, Fall 2024) titled “Meme Aesthetics,” featuring contributions from prominent film and media scholars grappling with the meme as a ubiquitous representational form of contemporary digital culture. Young also contributed a chapter to the forthcoming anthology *Autotheories*, edited by Alex Brostoff and Vilashini Cooppan, on vernacular vlogs, in which vloggers talk endlessly about their day, seeming to hide nothing and yet to reveal an “everything” that has almost no content. Finally, Young wrote the foreword for another forthcoming anthology, *Little Deaths: Sex and Psychoanalysis in the Age of Pandemics* (University of Regina Press, 2025), edited by Ricky Varghese. Young’s forward addresses the history of racialized fantasies of plagues and pandemics, which traffic in figures of viral contagion - and thus invoke paranoias about not only invasion by immigrants but of proliferative reproduction beyond normative sexuality.

Rick Kern will be on sabbatical next year, interviewing 2002-2004 UCEAP students from Lyon and Grenoble on how their study of French influenced the trajectory of their personal and professional lives. Rick published a number of articles this past year, including an anchor piece (“Twenty-first century technologies and language education: Charting a path forward”) responded to by six scholars from around the world for a special Perspectives issue of *The Modern Language Journal*.



Karl Britto continues to serve as Associate Dean of Arts & Humanities and as a member of the editorial committee of the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network. Along with French Ph.D. candidate **Alan Yeh**, he recently participated in an MLA session on “Legacies of 1975 in Southeast Asia and Its Diasporas.” They both look forward to welcoming French Vietnamese author Doan Bui to campus in April. Karl and **Debarati Sanyal** will be in conversation with French artist and filmmaker Tarek Lakhrissi at an upcoming conference on Decolonizing Gender and Sexualities; they will also be in conversation with South African artist William Kentridge, in conjunction with the Cal Performances premiere of Kentridge’s *The Great Yes, The Great No*. In April, Karl will also participate in a discussion with Diasporic Vietnamese authors and artists at the Night of Ideas in San Francisco, hosted by Villa Albertine and the Institut français.

Mairi McLaughlin is on sabbatical in 2025 to work on two projects. The first is on the first periodical devoted to the French language, Domergue’s *Journal de la langue française* (1784-1795), and the second is on language and translation in Franco-American newspapers. Mairi will be a Visiting Fellow at New College, Oxford, in Trinity Term 2025. While she’s in Europe she’ll be giving conference papers in Leeds (UK), Bristol (UK), Fribourg (Switzerland), and Catania (Sicily).

Maya Sidhu continues to publish and present research on French women filmmakers. In November 2024, she spoke about Yannick Bellon’s film, *Quelque Part Quelqu’un* (1972) at the Sorbonne. Her recently published book chapter, “Le regard actif de Faustine” (*Éditions de la Sorbonne*, 2024) on Nina Companeez’s film, *Faustine et le bel été* (1972), establishes the film’s aesthetics of women’s pleasurable looking within the constellation of feminist film production of the 1970s and its theoretical contexts. This April, Maya will present on influential postwar French women film editors at The Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Chicago. Maya is currently preparing a manuscript on director Alice Diop’s filmmaking for the British Film Institute.

Claire Tourmen was happy to teach the third recent iteration of Fr137 (French for Politics, Economics and Business) this past fall, with 21 committed students from various backgrounds (e.g., economics, political science, global studies). This spring **Maya Sidhu** is teaching a section of Fr137 on French cinema and the film industry. Students from Fr137 have found internships at the Alliance Française de Berkeley and San Francisco, Chambre de Commerce Franco-Américaine de San Francisco, FACS, Ecole Polytechnique de Paris, Ligue des Droits de l'Homme à Paris, Numberly (Paris) among other sites. We are very happy about these partnerships and thankful to the organizations who accepted to host our students! If you are interested in hosting one of our students for an internship, please contact Undergraduate Advisor **Nina Rennert-Cohen** (frendept@berkeley.edu).



Claire Tourmen and Fr137 students with S.F. Consul Général Florian Cardinaux.

Daniel Hoffmann is a Lecturer Teaching Fellow this year at the Center for Teaching & Learning. In November, along with **Rachel Shuh** and **Nick Paige**, he brought 40 well-dressed undergrads from all levels of the program to San Francisco Opera to see George Bizet's *Carmen*. The evening was preceded by an opera-themed party held in the Library of French



Thought. Daniel recently organized the first inaugural [Open Classroom Week](#) to provide Berkeley language instructors the opportunity to visit one another's classes to see the wide-ranging creativity happening in language teaching on campus, and to inspire instructors to expand their ideas and methods in their own classes. Some 80 sections in 12 different languages participated in Open Classroom Week.



In 2024, **Vesna Rodic** was selected to participate in the systemwide UC Women's Initiative. On the Berkeley campus, she was awarded the Faculty Fellows Award at the Center for Teaching and Learning, where she conducted a study on student experiences involving equity and inclusion since the pandemic. This project has continued to inform Vesna's work on discovery-based pedagogy as the Director of the Lower Division in French. In Fall 2024, she designed and taught a section of French 102 as an Art of Writing course at the Townsend Center for the Humanities. Together with **Rick Kern,**



Vesna Rodic's Art of Writing section of French 102

Déborah Blocker, and **Claire Tourmen,** Vesna has continued to work on the evaluation of the French for the Professions track through the Presidential Chair Fellows program at the Center for Teaching and Learning. Vesna's article on the role of discovery-based pedagogy in the construction of agency and community in advanced language classes was published in *Contextes Didactiques, Linguistiques et Culturels* in 2024. Recently, she also published two articles in literary studies, one on the construction of voice in Paul Valéry's poem *La Jeune Parque*, and another on representation of the multicultural self in Theresa Hak Kuyng Cha's *Dictée*. Together with **Michael Arrigo,** Vesna has continued to co-host speakers on topics in applied linguistics and the study of culture in L2 through the Berkeley Language Center's *Found in Translation* working group.

Graduate Student **Julie Catel** will be speaking on a panel at the 2025 Nuit des Idées in San Francisco, organized by **Claire Tourmen**. The panel is titled "The Rise of Conservative Populism:

A Comparison of Perspectives in France and the US,” and will focus on far-right populism in both countries. It’s happening on April 5th, most likely at the San Francisco Public Library. La Nuit des Idées should be a fun chance to connect with francophiles beyond academia! Julie will be part of another panel at UC Berkeley on April 30th in very our own French library.

Romance Languages & Literatures graduate student **Oliver Whitmore** is supervising five undergraduate students who are developing research skills outside of the classroom through an independent study of Occitan. Their efforts will contribute to a corpus of text-based data that will illuminate how Occitan is thriving in online spaces. *Ôsca !* (Bravo !)

Alan Yeh, while conducting archival research in Paris and Aix-en-Provence for his dissertation, published an article on Linda Lê entitled, “‘J’écris *contre*’: Linda Lê’s Refugitude Aesthetics” in *L’Esprit Créateur*. Alan also received the Outstanding GSI Award for his exceptional teaching, as well as a Southeast Asian Lives and Histories Project (SEALIVES) Small Grant to conduct oral history interviews in France and Vietnam. In the fall, he taught an upper-division course (Fr151: Francophone Diasporas of Southeast Asia) and invited Doan Bui and Jean-Baptiste Phou to speak to his class over Zoom with the support of a course improvement grant. In addition to presenting several conference papers, Alan published a book review of Jean-Baptiste Phou’s *La Peau hors du placard : Asiatique et gay, une vie de lutte* in the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network’s *diaCRITICS*.

UNDERGRADUATE HAPPENINGS

We are happy to have currently 51 French majors and 18 French minors, representing a steady increase in enrollment since the pandemic. Students engage in compelling upper division classes like [Gender, Space, and Diversity in Medieval French Literature](#) and [Francophone Diasporas of Southeast Asia](#), and we draw new students to the department through our thriving lower division language program and offerings in English such as [Frogs, Old Books, and Language: Breaking Language Barriers in the Academy](#) and [Perspectives on Housing](#). Students continue to meet up through [Le Cercle Français](#), going on outings to Senegalese and crepe restaurants and inviting speakers through their *Du thé avec un prof* gatherings. As mentioned earlier, Undergraduate Faculty Advisor and next year’s Department Chair, **Nicholas Paige**, has organized another student theatrical presentation in French for this Spring following last year’s successful *Le Legs*. Our Summer in Paris: Language, Literature, and the Arts Director **Daniel**

Hoffman is happy to see the program growing each year since the pandemic. Last summer, he and **Michel Arrigo** got to see their undergraduates take Paris by storm. They got to know an energetic group of French *collégiens* during a language exchange at the Collège Clémenceau; they attended designer Yuima Nakazato’s couture show during Fashion Week at the Palais de Tokyo; and they dined *en plein air* outside Monet’s country home in Giverny. In February, over 40 students attended the Paris Study Abroad Reunion and Student Showcase. Undergraduates **Henry Shomento**, **Megan Merrifeld**, **Jeremiah Collins**, and **Andres De La Cruz** shared pieces of the creative projects they produced in Paris last summer, and prospective students got a glimpse of what a summer in Paris could hold! The Summer in Paris program continues to draw more students than we have room for; they are hoping to attend Fashion Week for a second year in a row this summer.



Students in the 2024 Summer in Paris program

Now in the second year of our French-government funded Certificate of French for Professional Purposes program, the department is starting to see more native and heritage language speakers and students returning from UC Berkeley's Dual Degree Program with Sciences Po in our classes. To earn the Certificate, students take upper division coursework in French, including French 137: French for Professions and engage in an internship in French either in the Bay Area or abroad.



We had our first three graduates in the program last spring, and there are 26 more in the pipeline, pursuing the Certificate either on its own or in conjunction with a minor or major.

THE LIBRARY OF FRENCH THOUGHT



Finally, a note that our department library continues to develop as a space for undergraduate exploration, while providing faculty and graduate students with exceptional resources to pursue their research. Our recent graduate student librarians **Rachel O'Shea**, **Finn Turner**, and **Erin Dunbar** have made welcome changes that significantly improve the visibility of and access to our holdings. We would like to thank the French department community-at-large for their donations to our collections. If you are interested in donating materials to the Library of French Thought, please send an email to frenchlibrary@berkeley.edu. *Please note that alumni are welcome to use the reading room in the library during hours of operation.*

We would like to get some alumni news for our next newsletter – please send notes to Nicholas Paige at npaige@berkeley.edu

Please consider supporting the French Department with a gift during this year's **Big Give** campaign (March 13). [You can make a gift here.](#)

Un grand merci !