



## IN MEMORIAM

David Mark Van Leer  
Professor of English  
UC Davis  
1949-2013

To our distress, our colleague David Mark Van Leer died unexpectedly in New York City on April 3rd, 2013. An innovative scholar, award-winning teacher, and fine pianist and conductor, David earned his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from Cornell University, where he studied with the eminent Americanist, Michael Colacurcio, and enjoyed conducting the “Grand Symphonious Orchestra” in Gilbert and Sullivan productions. After Cornell, he went on to teach at Princeton University as the Andrew W. Mellon Assistant Professor of English Literature and American Studies. He was the recipient of a Donald Stauffer Preceptorship (1983-1985) and was much admired by students and colleagues, including a member of this committee who had the great pleasure of working with him on that campus.

David joined the Davis English department in 1986, where he frequently taught an undergraduate course on the Puritans. This offering was a tribute to the distinguished history of Davis Americanism, and though far from his professional specialty, David managed to make this somewhat off-putting material into one of the Department’s most popular courses. He also taught the undergraduate lecture in mid-nineteenth-century American literature, his field of specialization. In her teaching evaluation, one student wrote, “Each class was challenging and fun because the professor had a sincere interest in teaching....one of the best English classes/teachers in the school. David makes it a pleasure to come to class as discussions and lectures are always interesting and engaging.” Another noted, “Van Leer is an excellent teacher, and he does the impossible — he makes Puritan Lit. enjoyable.” He was a pedagogical innovator as well, teaching, with his customary aplomb, highly successful courses on the Broadway Musical and on Opera. In his “Introduction to Film,” David approached his subject from lesbian-gay-bi, and trans-sexual perspectives. Along with his superlative performance in the classroom, David won his students’ gratitude for his attentiveness and the sense of excitement he brought to individual conversations.

A productive scholar, David wrote widely on American culture for both academic publications and magazines like *The New Republic* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. His primary research was in cultural studies, with special emphases on lesbian and gay topics, film, and multi-ethnic discourse. As an American intellectual historian, he worked on philosophy and literature, making innovative contributions that revised contemporary interpretations of America’s cultural heritage. From Emerson’s Epistemology, the first book to argue that we take Emerson seriously as a philosopher, to *The Queening of America: Gay Culture in Straight Society*, where he offered a process by which “rhetorics and situations specific to homosexual culture are presented to a general readership as if culturally neutral,” his writings were always groundbreaking. His essay “View from the Closet: Reconcilable Differences in Douglass and Melville” investigates the intersection of race, gender, and slavery in ways that evoke a reexamination of two towering nineteenth-century American writers. Never one to shy away from academic controversy, David engaged in a sharply worded exchange

with the eminent gender theorist Eve Kosovsky Segwick, which appeared in the leading journal of theory, *Critical Inquiry*.

As a testament to his scholarly prowess, vast knowledge, and engaging lecturing style, David received numerous honors, including the UC Chancellor's Citation for Diversity, an NEH Research Grant, and an ACLS Research Fellowship. Additionally, he was a fellow at the University of California Humanities Research Institute. He was especially delighted to win the Deems Taylor Prize in Music Criticism for an article on Stephen Sondheim, published in *Raritan*. A lecturer with an international reputation, David was invited to speak on campuses and at conferences in the U.S., Israel, Toronto, Rome, England, Amsterdam, and Berlin. Most recently, he was asked to give a series of lectures in Thailand. Perhaps the honor he most enjoyed was serving on the National Advisory Board for the GRE, an examination required for admission to graduate school that helps shape the literary canon. Here David engaged in lively debate over the issues of inclusion and literary history he so much loved. His most recent campus honor, the Academic Senate Award for Distinguished Undergraduate Teaching recognized his contributions to his students and to the entire Davis community.

An active participant in departmental life, David was deeply committed to curricular reform and faculty diversity, earning the respect and admiration of his colleagues. When he took early retirement, the department suffered a serious loss. With his characteristic élan, however, David went on to make a new life for himself in New York City, where he lived with his cherished partner, the late artist and founder of the preservationist movement, Robert Miles Parker. At the time of his death, David was working on *Poe's Cosmology: The World of the Mind*, a book-length study of scientific Neoplatonism in the works of Poe and editing a volume of essays in queer theory.

David will be deeply missed here at Davis and by his students and colleagues around the world. He will be remembered not only as a brilliant teacher, innovative scholar, and vital intellectual, but, especially, as a beloved friend.

Joanne Diehl, Sandra Gilbert, Alan Williamson