

2016 English Summer Undergraduate Research with Faculty (SURF)

Emerson and the Formal Implications of Pragmatism

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Pragmatism and neopragmatism are unique in the discipline of philosophy for framing questions of truth in terms of practice. When what is true is relative to practice, the conception of practice becomes vital. This is especially the case with regard to questions of the extent to which practice is arbitrary and malleable, since truth must be correspondently unstable. The more so that practice is conceived in this light, the more that the approaches to addressing questions of truth lose the appearance of scientific rigor and start to adopt styles and forms that engage with subjects of inquiry in idiosyncratic ways.

This anomaly of form is exemplified by the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), which themselves explore philosophical questions. Essays such as “Experience” and “Circles” blend poetic imagery, epigrams, allusions, and metaphors, along with argumentation into a multidimensional approach to a topic. In this project, such formal properties of Emerson’s essays will be analyzed in light of the premises of pragmatism and neopragmatism.

This project will enhance the understanding of Emerson by analyzing his work without dividing the content of his propositions from the form of his arguments. Furthermore, it will clarify his relation, as well as that of transcendentalism more generally, with American pragmatism. Perhaps most importantly, it will demonstrate the degree to which philosophical positions not only inform but also are influenced by the formal decisions that inevitably constitute their presentations.

“Playing” Women: How Video Game Culture Exploits the Female Form

Student: Shannon Haas

Mentor: Tim Carens

Feminist scholars have examined much of the current media landscape and its representation of the female sex, but few have extended this analysis to video games. While Anita Sarkeesian’s video series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* has gained widespread attention for “deconstructing the stereotypes and tropes associated with women in popular culture” and “exploring the targeted harassment of women in online and gaming spaces,” she is effectively a solitary voice in the wilderness.

It is my argument that no aspect of contemporary popular culture deserves more attention from feminist critics than the video gaming world. The depiction of women in video games and associated media is demeaning, violent, and pornographic. It would be impossible to count the number of virtual abuses the video game community perpetrates against female characters each year. In digital brothels, strip clubs, and murder scenes decorated with eroticized female corpses, modern video games invite male players to corner, brutalize, and “play” with pixelated female bodies.

I aim to carry forward analysis of the way that video games perpetuate misogyny through the representation of women. During the grant period I will, first, deepen my understanding of feminist theory and criticism, moving beyond Sarkeesian’s work to expand my understanding of theoretical premises and analytical techniques. Second, I will conduct primary research on video games and associated media. Finally, I will write a conference-length essay and research professional conferences at which I might present it.

White Space: A Lyric Essay

Student: Jozita Konczal

Mentor: Emily Rosko

When setting out the seminal definition of the genre of the lyric essay in 1997, Deborah Tall and John D'Agata, wrote:

The recent burgeoning of creative nonfiction and the personal essay has yielded a fascinating sub-genre that straddles the essay and the lyric poem. These “poetic essays” or “essayistic poems” give primacy to artfulness over the conveying of information. They forsake narrative line, discursive logic, and the art of persuasion in favor of idiosyncratic meditation. The lyric essay partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form.

Nearly twenty years later, the lyric essay is here to stay. The genre as a whole has grown, placing a once-on-the-margins form into the center of the American literary scene. Some of the most profound and provocative books in the past decade have been penned via the liberating form of the lyric essay (in particular, the works of award-winning writer and poet Claudia Rankine).

The lyric essay also can enfold techniques from fiction, journalism, song, film, digital media, and the visual arts. Thus, its malleability and hybridity lends form to subject matters that might not be easily categorized; “messier” subjects that are more difficult to talk about. This proposed lyric essay project will explore how highly subjective experiences—pain, questions of faith—can be communicated better through the art of a cross-genre approach.

Sherlockian Sites: The Place of Holmes in the 21st Century

Student: Victoria Rego

Mentor: Terence Bowers

To explain Sherlock's extraordinary appeal, Edgar W. Smith in “The Implicit Holmes” states that we love Holmes because he is “all that we are not, but ever would be.” Scholars, such as Peter Haining, have proposed arguments that center on the idea that Holmes fills a need for a rationalizing and ordering force in a modern world of instability. Still others, such as Anthony Giffone, note the combination of intrigue, personality, place, and time that draws people to Holmes. However, the scholarship does not explain the transcendence of Sherlock from literature into the physical spaces of modern London and Great Britain.

The aim of this project is to explore the places that were inspired by, and inspired, Arthur Conan Doyle's popular Sherlock Holmes series. This study will investigate questions such as: who visits these places and what do they discover there? What are the relations between the physical sites and the fictional world of the literature? What is it about Sherlock that inspires people not just to read, but also to physically experience his world? And most importantly, how and to what extent does literature impact modern society? Answers to these questions will deepen our understanding of Sherlock's broad – indeed worldwide – appeal and allow me to bolster or offer alternative explanations to the arguments put forth by the scholars mentioned above. Further, as this study examines the physical sites and infrastructure built to serve travelers to Sherlockian places, it will explore and help open up a relatively unexplored topic in the scholarship on Sherlock Holmes: literary tourism.