

## **“Is this the promised end?”:**

### **Reflections on the Third Year of the Arnhold Undergraduate Research Fellows Program**

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I moved to Santa Barbara from Albany, New York some four years ago. Consequently, “the quarter system” remains relatively new to me. Although I greatly appreciate the fact that it miraculously transforms September into a summer month, each year the brutal, twenty-five week stretch known as “winter and spring quarters” has left me exhausted, traumatized and in grave need of a summer break; each year, that is, until this one. I write this in the early morning of June 1<sup>st</sup> and, for the first time (perhaps in my entire life) at this late date, I feel a tinge of malaise. There is no doubt in my mind that this eerie discontent is an epiphenomenon of the imminent closure of my tenure as the graduate fellow for the Arnhold Undergraduate Research Fellows Program.

To say that my time with the Arnhold fellows was enjoyable would be a litote worthy of the finest Anglo-Saxon poet (who were quite fond of that device). The year began with efforts at solicitation. Although I inherited an amazing group of seasoned, returning second year fellows from my fantastic predecessor Shannon Brennan, the first order of business was to procure a flock of first years to mold in my own warped image. I sent emails to all of the English Department’s eligible majors, inviting them to apply to the program and was happy to receive a zesty response. After a tireless effort, we began the year with thirty-seven new, first year fellows! While it was wonderful to welcome such a large group, it left us with a structural difficulty: in the past, first year and second year students had been paired together in a mentor-protégé relationship. Since the ratio of mentors to protégés was nine to thirty seven, this approach wasn’t tenable. Instead, we decided to form teams. Naturally, I insisted that they have with corny, literary names. Hence the birth of the Shakespeare Shakers, Absolutely Anonymous, Mercutio and the Queen Mabs, Into the Wilde, the Mindful Menaces, Team Difference Machine, Grimm’s Girls and the Walloping Warlocks.

In an effort to promote group cohesion, we engaged in a few optional competitions during winter quarter. In the first I asked each group to perform a five page “close-reading,” standard fare for English majors. The groups were allowed to choose any text available to them for analysis (i.e. novels and poems, but also sitcoms, youtube videos, advertisements, etc.) The catch was that, although it was early January, only texts produced after 1/1/2012 were eligible. I could not have been more pleased with the results. Highlights included readings of a popular “viral video” entitled “shit white girls say to black girls,” a country music video (Justin Moore’s colorful “Bait a Hook”), an episode of television (*Once Upon a Time*), a “mash-up” of two pop songs and a Chinese super hero. For the second “group challenge,” I asked the teams to produce a skit based on their choice of literary scene. Unfortunately, this challenge took place late in winter quarter and only four groups opted to participate. Fortunately those four groups made the event truly unforgettable. On the day of the competition, a panel of esteemed judges (comprised of my friends from the graduate program) witnessed “Waiting for Brodot,” a hilarious adaptation of Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot,” which adopted the parlance of UCSB “bro” culture. The second skit translated Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* into a rollicking series of facebook interactions and the third altered a Grimms’ Brothers fairy tale into a meta-commentary on the Arnhold Program itself (you sort of had to be there, but it featured a stunningly accurate impersonation of my own somewhat flat voice). Finally, a group that was unable to be at the competition videotaped a rendition of “the mad tea-party” scene from Louis Carroll’s *Alice and Wonderland*, replete with wacky background music and a stuffed pig that somehow spoke.

Meanwhile the first year fellows were regularly attending a series of colloquia that took place over the course of winter and spring quarters. At the colloquia, a panel of professors, graduate students and other members of our department's community addressed a given topic in literary studies. We did a total of eight colloquia; topics included life in graduate school, American studies, COMMA (our department's Center on Modernism, Materialism and Aesthetics), medieval literatures, how to prepare a poster presentation (in anticipation of our spring research showcase), the department's Early Modern Center, as well as its Literature and the Mind concentration and, finally, applying to graduate school. Although I can't speak for the fellows, I learned a great deal at the colloquia and am forever grateful to those members of the English department who were willing to share their valuable time and wisdom with the fellows.

By far, the most elaborate happening of the year was the spring research showcase. In past years, this event has taken the form of a research poster showcase, at which presenters stand by posters that manifest their respective research interests and explain them to audience members who circulate independently throughout the room. Since my predecessors were extremely successful in using this template, we chose not to rock the boat. About a month before the showcase, a committee met to determine its date, time and title. While the date and the time proved quite difficult to hammer down in the proceeding weeks, the fellows effortlessly fabricated a brilliant title: "Literature: Crossing the Borders of Reality." Next, a second year fellow, Edda Margeson, crafted a stunning flier, with which I veritably plastered South Hall. I must confess that, at times, while planning this event, I felt as though I too was crossing the border of reality. The result, however, was well worth those passing moments of madness. The event, which lasted for roughly three hours, was energetic, enjoyable and filled with enthusiasm. Research topics included, but were not limited to, literary innovation, blogging asexual identity, the cinematic adaptation of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, literature and insanity, Kate Chopin's notion of "the new woman," life and death in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, children's literature as political satire, literary representations of the female soldier, dramatic monologue in Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover," compassion in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Shakespearean theater, irrationality and symbolic logic in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, darkness and perception, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the medieval enchantress, surreal folktales, trauma in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, "the uncanny valley" and the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates. Needless to say, there was a lot to like.

Without the undying support of UCSB's English department community (not to mention the exceptional generosity of John and Judy Arnhold) neither this event, nor any of those related above would have been possible. From the bottom of my heart, I thank all of those who helped. What follows is this year's issue of *Emergence*, the Arnhold program's prestigious online journal. While the essays are predominantly by second year fellows, most of who will graduate in a few days, two first years, Leanna Richardson and Morgan Sander, boldly opted to submit essays in lieu of participating in the research showcase. With the help of Elizabeth Shaughnessy, I've standardized their submissions and done some minimal editing. The following essays reflect the years of diligent, loving labor that their authors have devoted to the study of English literature. While they are predominantly analytic (as is our Department) the last, an untitled piece by Tuzuk Koul, is a work of fiction, and quite moving at that. I send this year's edition into the world with joy, relief and, as I mentioned above, a tinge of melancholy. I will not soon forget my experiences with the Arnhold program and remain . . .

Yours,

Paul Megna

