



BYU Humanities Center

2024–2025 Newsletter

The background of the entire graphic is a photograph of a multi-story building with a light-colored facade, partially obscured by the dense, light-colored blossoms of trees in the foreground. The text is overlaid on this image.

BYU HUMANITIES CENTER

2024–2025

Table of Conte

Statement from the Director	2
Fellowships	4
Public Humanities	7
Faith & Imagination Lecture Series	8
Annual Symposium	10
Colloquia	12
Research Groups	22
Art in the Humanities Center	24
Student Work	26
Looking Ahead	31



Statement from the DIRECTOR

Joy can be surprisingly difficult to define. Psychologists often describe joy according to scales of intensity, informing us that it is a feeling of “extreme gladness, delight, or exultation.” If one feels these emotions acutely, they might be described as joy.

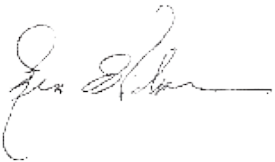
Consequently, the degree to which one has developed a sense of well-being or accomplishment or the extent to which one feels happy or content or satisfied (which all variously serve as synonyms for joy) may be the qualifying dynamic as to whether a given experience passes the emotional threshold into joy. According to this logic, an individual need only eliminate negative feelings and amplify their participation in activities that produce happiness to enter a state of joy. Yet understanding and finding that threshold often remain elusive for most of us.

The metaphor of a threshold, however, may lead to a distorted or incomplete understanding of joy since it suggests that joy comes after one no longer feels some other emotion, that is, that one experiences joy after having worked through a series (sometimes long and painful) of other, ostensibly less-desirable emotions. The writer Ross Gay describes it this way: “Joy, the thinking goes, is that room at the top of a flight of stairs that, upon entering, washes you with clean air and glad music and comfy furniture and gentle warmth emanating from the white pine floors, suffused with light pouring in from enormous windows with a sweet window seat where you can read a happy book.” Yet Gay and many others rightfully argue that the spatial metaphor of joy as the reward for pressing through a staircase of other emotions frankly fails to express the real experience of joy. Joy does not exist in a room by itself. Joy nearly always bursts out alongside a host of other complex and even contradictory emotions. And in many ways, joy depends upon these other, sometimes unwanted, feelings of disappointment, heartache, and pain.

In a world of sorrow, it can be hard to contemplate joy; and given the multiple forms of tragedy that abound in the world, some might question the decision to focus on joy when we’re surrounded by so much injustice, oppression, and violence. Yet I believe that a yearning for joy, the search for and celebration of joy in all its complex forms, is what the world needs. Ross Gay states it better than me: “My hunch is that joy, emerging from our common sorrow—which does not necessarily mean we have the same sorrows, but that we, in common, sorrow—might draw us together. It might depolarize us and de-atomize us enough that we can consider what, in common, we love.”

This past academic year, the BYU Humanities Center explored forms of joy. Colleagues from BYU and beyond helped us answer a variety of questions related to the varied manifestations of joy: the joy that comes from academic discovery, the joy of spiritual experience, the joy of learning a language, the joy of reading, the joy that comes from curiosity, from finding, from connection. In doing so, we were invited to remember that as relevant and important as the skills of the humanities may be (skills related to critical thinking, information literacy, cultural navigation, and communication), what drives interest in the humanities is actually something far less practical and much more visceral: it's joy!

This is not to downplay the importance of acknowledging and explicitly teaching the skills of the humanities to students. I believe we must become better equipped not only at teaching those skills and helping our students articulate those skills to themselves and others, as well as at understanding how the capacities we develop through humanities education transfer to other disciplines and professions. Nevertheless, my concern here is that as we become adept at having that conversation, we must not lose sight of the joy that humanistic pursuits bring us. That is to say, to whatever degree we teach, emphasize, and even proselytize the transferable skills of the humanities, let us remember and help others experience the deep joy of human connection and understanding comes through the humanities.



Rex Nielson

Humanities Center Director
Department of Spanish and Portuguese



HumanitiesCenterFacultyFellows



Brian Croxall
2024 – 2027
Associate Research Professor
of Digital Humanities



Cherice Montgomery
2023 – 2026
Associate Professor of
Spanish Pedagogy



Sara Phenix
2023 – 2026
Associate Professor
of French



Chris Rogers
2023 – 2026
Associate Professor
of Linguistics



James Swensen
2024 – 2027
Associate Professor
of Art History



Stephen Tuttle
2023 – 2026
Associate Professor
of English

HumanitiesCenterOne-YearAppointments



Matthew Ancell
Associate Professor of
Interdisciplinary Humanities



Aaron Eastley
Associate Professor
of English

HumanitiesCenterAssistantDirectors



Brooke Browne
Assistant Director



Ryan Hill
Assistant Academic Director

Eliza R. Snow Undergraduate Fellows



Mabel Court
Interdisciplinary Humanities
(Global Women's Studies; Family Life)



Sophie Hirtle
Comparative Literature and
French Studies
(Global Women's Studies)



Kaden Nelson
English
(Music)



Coleman Numbers
English
(Japanese)



Sydney Jo Pedersen
Applied English Linguistics
(TESOL; Family Life; French)



Starly Pratt
English
(Creative Writing; Family Life)

INTERNS



Kathryn Charles
English
(Editing)



Jasmine Torres
Public Relations
(Asian Studies)

VS



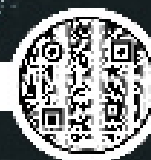
Humanities Center Blog



Faith & Imagination

A BYU Humanities Center Podcast

HUMANITIESCENTER.BYU.EDU



Public Humanities

Faith and Imagination Lecture Series: Laura Reece Hogan

What God Touches, God Transforms: Theology and Poetry of Divine Unfolding

Written by Kathryn Charles

Using scriptural and poetic paradox, Laura Reece Hogan informed our understanding of what it means to be in relationship with God.

Prize-winning poet Laura Reece Hogan offered profound insights into how the apostle Paul's perspectives on paradox reveal the distinctive power of poetry to express the divine. She thoroughly examines Paul's biblical letters in her book *I Live, No Longer I: Paul's Spirituality of Suffering, Transformation, and Joy*, exploring simultaneous, paradoxical realities arising from the inevitable clash between heavenly and earthly realities—including life in death, power in weakness, victory in apparent defeat, and joy in suffering. Even as we navigate the tangible challenges of mortal life, Hogan posits that the ultimate Christian task is to identify and cling to a heavenly reality, enabling us to discover a joy that coexists with suffering.



To further untangle the spiritual experience of being in a relationship with God amid these tensions, Hogan outlined a three-fold cyclical pattern in Paul's writings. The first stage, which she calls kenosis, involves a descent brought about by loss, suffering, or sacrifice. The second stage, enosis, encompasses experiences of communion with God through creation, human love, and community. The third stage, theosis, represents a transformation in which the soul becomes increasingly unified with God. As we continuously transform through these stages, we grow closer to God.

Hogan's poetry delves deeply into these heavenly and earthly tensions and the dynamic interplay of these stages. "A poetic text can companion us in those moments where we meet God," she shared, whether as a comfort in moments of loss and suffering, as a reminder of brighter moments of creation and community, or a tool for unification with God.

Hogan suggested that the inherent porousness of poetry invites readers into a living, spiritual reality in which they can navigate the complexity of a relationship with God. Her reflections remind us that, whether through scripture or personal creativity, poetry holds a unique power to illuminate the mysteries of faith and the transformative journey of the soul:

**"Poetic texts may come closest to our
ability to express the divine."**

Faith and Imagination Lecture Series: Leonard McMahon

Democratic Dispositions: Learning to Live Together in a Post-Election World

Written by Kathryn Charles

Leonard McMahon redefines democracy as a shared act of trust, imagination, and everyday formation.

The Humanities Center welcomed Leonard McMahon, assistant professor of Pastoral Care at the Pacific School of Religion, as a Faith & Imagination lecturer to present how classical spirituality and modern political theory can inform a pastoral approach to navigating today's polarized political climate.

McMahon began his presentation by challenging traditional notions of democracy, emphasizing that it should be deliberative, participatory, and inclusive: "Democracy is not about power or procedures, it's

about culture and formation. People become certain kinds of people who can therefore live in a community with strangers." Democracies, he explained, aren't formed or maintained by chance—they are cultivated through what he called democratic dispositions: "habits of the mind and heart and body" that allow us to do the hard work of democracy.

While McMahon described democracy as a co-creative process built for disagreement, he also clarified that for it to function, we must shift what we expect from it. Democracy thrives only when we view those we disagree with as opponents rather than enemies; when we choose to love those who like different things than us; and when we trust each other even when we don't agree. By fostering the habits of a democratic disposition, we become the type of people who can engage with the world on its own terms, in all its differences.

This capacity to engage across difference, McMahon argued, is rooted in faith and imagination:

"I have to be able to imagine something other than my particular way of being in the world, my particular way of making meaning, my particular spirituality, my particular discipline, in order to have any kind of relationship with someone who does."

McMahon asserted that those who consider themselves spiritual or religious already have the tools for democratic living. What remains is the conscious choice to embody those dispositions in public life. We get to decide how to live together as strangers in a shared democracy. "We have a choice and a chance," he concluded. "That's all we have. That's all we should need."





2024 Annual Symposium

The God Who Laughs: Examining Intersections of Faith & Humor

On September 27 and 28, the Humanities Center partnered with its Humor Studies research group to host a two-day symposium exploring a provocative question: Can God laugh? Together with students, faculty, and guests, the event examined the often-perceived tension between the comic and the sacred.

The symposium began on BYU's campus and concluded at the scenic Timp Lodge, featuring 13 speakers from BYU and other universities. The event offered an interdisciplinary dive into how humor appears across religious traditions, literary forms, and historical contexts. Each presentation focused on the intersection of humor, joy, and spirituality, probing how laughter fits into the life of faith.

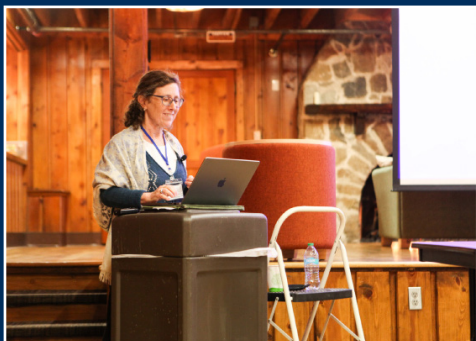
Three keynote speakers offered distinct perspectives (see right). BYU faculty also contributed presentations ranging from personal reflections on the challenges of authenticity in Christian living to humorous plays put on by Spanish nuns, and attendees were treated to a roundtable on humor as a tool for cultivating hope.

Rather than framing humor as merely comic relief, presenters emphasized its deeper role: as a mode of resilience, a method of survival, and a vital part of spiritual life. Humor, they argued, belongs not just to the human experience—but to the sacred as well.





In his presentation "Does God Have a Sense of Humor?" Simran Jeet Singh from the Aspen Institute explored humor as both a vehicle for spiritual insight and a means of cultivating compassion and empathy.



Anita Houck from Saint Mary's College drew from humor studies, literary analysis, neuroscience, and theology to examine depictions of the divine through laughter in her presentation "From Homer to Homer: Divine Laughter from The Iliad to The Simpsons."



Columbia University's Jeremy Dauber discussed how comedy functions as a vital, enduring feature of Jewish tradition in a presentation titled "Is Judaism Funny? A Historical Investigation."



The roundtable discussion featured a panel of Utah-based comedians, including Lisa Valentine Clark, Eric D. Snider, and Katie and Ken Craig.

2024–2025 COLLOQUIA





Rachel Arteaga
University of Washington
"Feelings of Faith in
American Literature"

Michael Call and Brian Croxall
Brigham Young University
"Y Play Games?"

Anna Nogar
University of New Mexico
"A Window into the Mexican
Revolution: Pancho Villa's 1916
Raid and La punitiva in the
Hispanophone Borderlands"

"Joyresidestoodeplywithinusto
befullyunderstoodinit'sstrongestforms.
It cannot be articulated in words."

Rachel Arteaga

Bruce Graver
Providence College
"Tintern and the Wye:
A Stereoscopic Tour"



Charles Inouye
Tufts University
"Postmodern Ecology:
Restoring the Power of Things
through Haiku"



Greg Thompson, Earl Brown, Brian Roberts,
Mary Eyring, and Rachael Johnson
Brigham Young University
"The Joys of Graduate Education"

"By virtue of four having been
born, we are guaranteed the ability
to act, and each action is a little birth:
spontaneous, unforeseen, risky,
error-prone, and miraculous."

Jennifer Banks



Beth Piatote
UC Berkeley
"Indigenous Joy and Language
Revitalization"

"We might take
multilingualism as a method that
illuminates not how languages are lost,
but how they live, and how they might
be found."

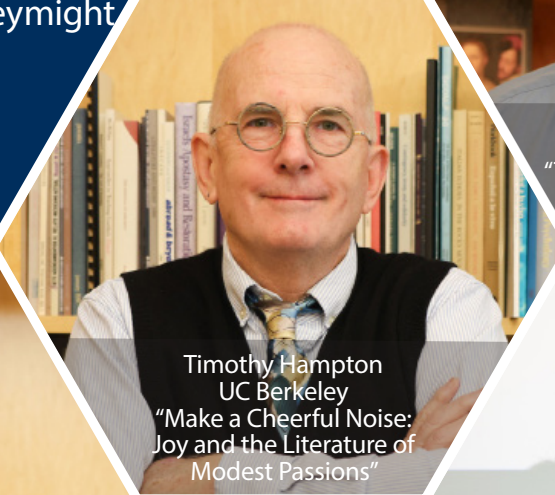
Akshya Saxena



Christopher Blythe
Brigham Young University
"The Redemption of Emma Hale
Smith: Legend and
Folk Biography"

"Social media
academics, an oppo
broadly share what
we love it with an audie
reach otherwise. It
bring the human ne
we're resea

Kylie Bro



Timothy Hampton
UC Berkeley
"Make a Cheerful Noise:
Joy and the Literature of
Modest Passions"



Matthew Ancell
Brigham Young University
"A World with Two Suns: Skeptical
Faith in Calderón de la Barca
The Schism in England"

"Literature offers a
deliberative and careful space for
probing ideas and forming hope in a
time of crisis."

George Handley



Shupei Wang, Shinsuke Tsuchiya,
and Adam Fisher
Brigham Young University
"Integrating Native Language and
Meditation to Enhance
Immersive Learning"



media gives us, as
opportunity to more
what we love and why
audience we may never
e. It is a great way to
business back into what
researching."
Kylie Brooks



Jennifer Banks
Yale University Press
"Nativity: Toward a New
Language for Birth"



Kylie Brooks, Josh Perkey, Ben
Crosby, and Johnny Allred
Brigham Young University
"Cultivating a Social Media
Presence"



Brandon Baird
Middlebury College
"Hearing Race on a
Single Word"



Akshya Saxena
Vanderbilt University
"Comparative Literature,
Infrastructures of Loss, and the
Promises of Multilingualism"



George Handley
Brigham Young University
"Literature as Theodicy: Exploring
the Postsecularity of Literature
in a Time of Climate Crisis"

"The poem presents a collage of
connections to places and people.
He is not singular or solitary, he is a
product of them all."
Aaron Eastley



Aaron Eastley
Brigham Young University
"'All Distance Gone': Leslie
Norris's Transnational Poetics"

"What would it be like if BYU
became known for its creativity,
its innovation, and its playfulness, in
addition to its scholarly rigor?"
Cherice Montgomery



Cherice Montgomery
Brigham Young University
"Outside the Lines: The
Presumptuous Power of Play"

Beth Piatote

Healing Language Rifts

Written by Kira Christensen (revised for this publication)

When it comes to language restoration, play does the real work.

How do we effectively restore endangered languages? According to Beth Piatote (associate professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley), the answer is language play. In her presentation titled “Indigenous Joy and Language Revitalization,” Piatote discussed the importance of language restoration and how combining language with the arts can overcome barriers to revitalization efforts for those such as her own heritage language of Nez Perce, the native language of the central-Idaho-based Nimiipuu people.

When communities lose their heritage languages, they lose the knowledge of the relationships between words and grammar that revealed how their ancestors understood the world. As a result, somehow work in indigenous language revitalization call

themselves language healers, a term that Piatote likes for its dual nature. “The work is about healing the wound of languages being stripped away from their communities,” she said. And for Piatote, her language is such a source of hope that she turns to her dictionary for comfort when she finds herself in despair. “I can connect to its comforting and lively presence,” she said. “So, for me, the language itself is a great healer.”

However, restoring an endangered language comes with a myriad of difficulties. One of these is simply the self-consciousness of language workers. Languages become endangered when few children are born into them as native speakers, which in turn makes older children and adults the primary language workers. Piatote explained that often older speakers feel immense pressure to use the language “right” by speaking exactly how their ancestors did, worrying that to do otherwise would somehow “break” the language.

Piatote has experimented with the arts as a potential solution. In her own work, she’s adopted a strategy of incorporating Nez Perce words into her poetry. This intentional use of her language in her art has given her the freedom to experiment with her language in new and creative ways. Piatote also created an indigenous poetics lab at UC Berkeley that encourages others to use any aspect of the arts in their language work, from dancing to visual arts to the written word. “In my experience, this strategy is effective at creating an environment of play and authority in the language,” she said, explaining that play first allows the nervous system to move out of trauma responses and then helps integrate the language into the body by performance of the work.

“Through authorship, we gain authority with our languages, and through play, we affirm that the language is strong, and we can’t break it.”



Learning through Joyful Play: Featured Colloquium

Michael Call and Brian Croxall

Y Not Talk About Games?

Written by Kira Christensen (revised for this publication)

The College of Humanities has a chance to put itself at the forefront of discussions on the biggest cultural influence of the century: video games.



In a presentation titled “Y Play Games” Professor Michael Call (17th-Century French Art and Literature) and Associate Research Professor Brian Croxall (Digital Humanities) reasoned that video games need to be studied right alongside the cultural influences of film, literature, and music in the College of Humanities.

The influence of video games in the modern era is impossible to ignore—think Fortnite dances at soccer games, Assassin’s Creed characters as Olympic torchbearers, and the \$73.5 million TV production of The Last of Us. Call quoted a study from the Entertainment Software Association in 2024 that reported that 61% of Americans play at least an hour of video games per week, and the average age of those players is 36. “Video games are increasingly important, both culturally and economically,” he said.

“Figures are somewhat hard to come by, but there are analysts who argue that by some metrics, the video game industry is now larger than the music industry ... It’s about on par with the film industry.”

However, Call explained that academic studies in this area aren’t keeping pace with the industry’s growth and influence, leaving a substantial gap between student interests and educators’ understanding of those interests. Call and Croxall believe the College of Humanities has an opportunity to fill in the conversational gap at BYU. “Many of us are concerned with students’ disengagement with the humanities,” Call said. “What if we could connect with students about something that they care about deeply, and show them how the concepts and approaches of our discipline can help them engage mindfully in new ways with creative works that they love?”

To that end, they’ve started a weekly lecture series designed to mirror the International Cinema—only with video games, not film. Their weekly lecture series, titled the same as their presentation, seek to start a conversation by inviting humanities professors to give a 30-minute presentation exploring a game they’ve enjoyed through the context of a humanities topic.

“Our traditional humanities lenses can reveal important things about the games that we play, and, in turn, games can illuminate humanities concepts in novel ways,” Call said.

“It’s up to us to then discuss them as cultural artifacts, as creative works, and to ask of them the kinds of questions that we’re already asking of other forms of media and art. Our goal is not to divert the humanities into game studies but instead to bring games into the larger humanistic conversation, and I think that’s what we’re well equipped to do.”

Lecture
series
schedule



Rachel Arteaga

Reimagining Career Preparation in English Departments

Written by Kathryn Charles

To bust stubborn myths and boost student success post-graduation, faculty in the humanities need to get practical about career prep.

Prior to her colloquium presentation on “Feelings of Faith in American Literature,” Rachel Arteaga (associate director of the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington) led a discussion on the 2024 MLA Report on English Majors’ Career Preparation and Outcomes, a report Arteaga coauthored as part of an ad hoc committee comprised of members from the Association of Departments of English. The report documents that, despite myths to the contrary, English majors and minors are employed, earn good salaries, and experience satisfaction with their career paths in a wide variety of professional fields.

The MLA report also offers recommendations for how departments can better support students’ career preparation, cautioning that if departments would like to recruit and retain students more effectively, they will have to turn their attention to doing career preparation work more explicitly.

Arteaga affirmed that an English major is valuable regardless of its financial profit. However, she also questioned whether most English students ever think to pursue the many viable career paths outside of teaching, creative writing, and editing and publishing. “It’s not just the students who are lacking creativity—departments and communities are lacking in creativity around English majors,” she shared. “On the flip side, students come to faculty members and faculty say students can do anything with their major, effectively empowering and disabling their students at the same time.”



Arteaga offered several concrete suggestions for faculty in the humanities to facilitate students’ professional success:

- Explain how the skills built in the classroom will be valued in a professional setting.
- Display a visual that illustrates the variety of careers open to a student in the English major in classrooms and offices.
- Incorporate a curricular incentive for students to explore their career interests and participate in career preparation within a course.
- Invite alumni to return and share their vivid and concrete career examples to students in their respective majors.
- Host a hiring application materials workshop.
- Connect ambitions with potential career paths in one-on-one conversations with students.

Quoting the MLA report, Arteaga stated, “When we place students, their concerns, and their authentic ambitions at the center of our focus, we find that career preparation is not optional or additional to what we do in English departments. It is imperative.”

Read the MLA Report on English Major’s Career Preparation and Outcomes



Student Professional Development: Featured Conversations

Public Debate on Graduate Education

The Joys of Graduate Education

Written by Kathryn Charles

While advanced degrees come with their fair share of struggles, they can also bring unexpected joy through purpose, community, and resilience.

In a public debate titled “The ‘Joys’ of Graduate Education,” six faculty from the BYU College of Humanities formed a panel to explore the rewards and challenges of pursuing advanced degrees. The primary question of the debate was not whether students should pursue an advanced degree, but why, particularly in the humanities.

The panel, which included Earl Brown (Linguistics), Greg Thompson (Spanish and Portuguese), Brian Roberts (English), Mary Eyring (English), and Rachael Johnson (Comparative Arts and Letters), offered diverse perspectives and initial reasons for tackling an advanced degree, demonstrating that there is not one right way to do graduate school. But most panelists agreed that the greatest—and most unexpected—joys of graduate education were the relationships formed with mentors and cohorts, where they learned to collaborate, embrace the process, and build a lasting support network.



When faced with the fact that only about 40% of PhD candidates will complete the requirements for their degree, the panelists were asked what motivated them to stay in graduate school. Rather than attributing their degree to pure grit and sheer will, many of the panelists shared that they were only able to complete their degree after realizing that their identity was larger than academia. Once they had broken the false mental binary of either proving their worth or throwing in the towel altogether, they were able to complete their degree with their health and relationships intact and even savor their learning experience.

This learning experience is precisely why the panelists recommend that students receive a graduate education, regardless of students' interest in a career in academia. Advanced degrees extend opportunities to connect with interesting people, practice radical collaboration, and master not only program content, but an understanding of oneself. “I learned to say, ‘This is what I have to offer: this is who I am, where I am, and what I can do,’” recalled Rachael Johnson. “I want to offer something, and I want to learn together.”



Featured Colloquium: Joy in the Humanities

Timothy Hampton

Carriers of Joy

Written by Kira Christensen (revised for this publication)

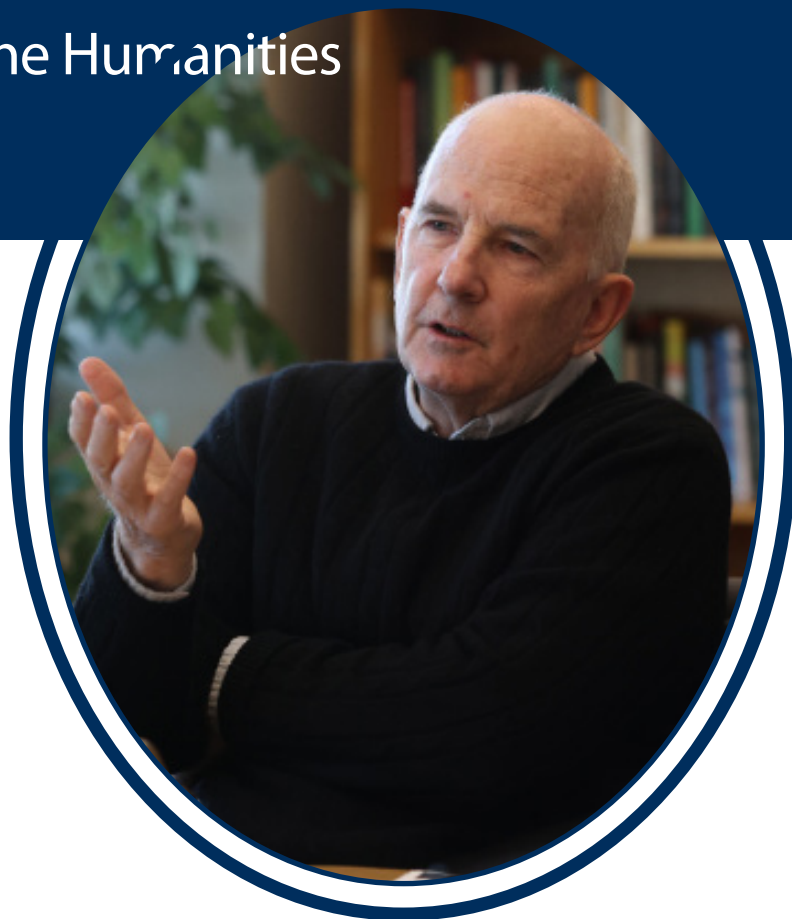
What do Shakespeare's tragedies and the book of Proverbs have in common? Timothy Hampton says they can teach us about joy.

In his colloquium address titled "Make a Cheerful Noise: Joy and the Literature of Modest Passions," Timothy Hampton (professor of French and comparative literature at University of California, Berkeley) shared his recent literary investigation into depictions of cheer and joy in Early Modern literature, examining what the two separate but interlinked feelings can tell us about our interactions with emotion.

Hampton started by explaining the difference between the two: Cheer is an externally oriented emotion, while joy is internally oriented. "Joy has a transcendent, conclusive, and even metaphysical dimension, while cheerfulness is much more limited," Hampton said.

But cheer is neither useless nor shallow. Hampton's hypothesis is that cheer is a stabilizing force for joy: "Joy has a tendency to turn into something else, like severity or grief, if you leave it alone ... Cheer is a kind of lost mediator, an element that steadies the unstable relationship between joy and grief and makes it available for others."

Using examples from Shakespeare plays and the King James Version of the Bible, he explained that cheer is a carrier emotion that allows us to express our joy to others without overwhelming them.



"Joy passes through the interior self, through cheerful thoughts, and expands out into the larger world."

As for the larger implications of Hampton's investigation, he hopes that looking for cheer and joy in literature will bring some of the fun back into the study of the humanities. "I think the humanities have boxed themselves into a corner through an obsessive focus on critique and ideological deconstruction of every text," he said. "Why would you read these novels if they're just tools of ideology? We really need to think about rediscovering the ways in which art can be redemptive ... The humanities [are meant to] teach us joy."

National Humanities Center Fellow

Daniel Paul

PROJECT:

“Normalizing ‘Abnormality’ in Italian Cinema: Depictions of Down Syndrome (DS) in *Dafne* and *Mio fratello rincorre i dinosauri*”

Two recent 2019 Italian films, Federico Bondi's *Dafne* and Stefano Cipani's *Mio fratello rincorre i dinosauri* subvert the traditional representation of Down Syndrome and of disability more generally. An attentive reading of these films reveals the inherent abilities of characters with Down, *Dafne* and *Gio*, and the extent to which they yearn for and embody normalcy. As highly functioning, effectively able-bodied individuals, they facilitate the recuperation to normalcy of their ostensibly non-disabled, yet low functioning, and morally, emotionally, and even physically deficient counterparts, *Luigi* and *Jack*, respectively. By positioning *Dafne* and *Gio* as the more “normal” characters, the films call into question long-standing assumptions about disability and able-bodiedness; expose an inherent crisis linked to non-disabled individuals; and reveal the subversive potential of disability representation in Italian cinema. Yet, at the same time, by centralizing *Luigi*'s mourning and melancholia and *Jack*'s adolescent identity crisis, the films ultimately privilege and shore up white, male, able-bodiedness as the ideal, even as they challenge traditional depictions of disability in Italian cinema.

Daniel Paul is an Assistant Professor of Italian at Brigham Young University, chair of the College of Humanities' Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging committee, and a member of the Global Women's Studies Executive Committee. His research and teaching interests include Gender Studies, Popular Culture, Trauma Theory, Italian Cinema, and Media Studies.



2024–2025 Research Groups

Boarding School Stories
BYU Religious Studies in Europe
Cognition and Literature
Disability Studies
Editing and Publishing
Game Studies
Greek and Latin Translation
Foreign Language Housing
Health Humanities
Humanities and the Learning Sciences
Humor
Jazz, Blues, and Beyond
Medieval and Renaissance Studies (MARS)
Metaethics in the Mountains
Provo Walks Lab
Romantic and Victorian Studies (RVSG)
Spirituality and Imagination
Theology and Humanities
Women's Studies Teaching and Research (WSTAR)

Featured Research Group Events



MARS Guest lecture
Susanne Woods from the University of Miami presented "Then let us have our liberty again": Milton and Lanyer on Eve and Human Freedom."



Health Humanities Guest Lecture
Gretchen Case from the University of Utah presented her current research and the new medical humanities curriculum she helped develop at the University of Utah.



Jazz, Bues, and Beyond Guest Lecture
Michael Gallope from the University of Minnesota presented on "Ornette Coleman's Utopian Intentionalities, c. 1966."



Metaethics in the Mountains Workshop
This event gathered philosophers from across North America and colleagues from BYU for a multi-day discussion of metaethics.

Art in the Humanities Center

Hanging on by a Thread: Strung Together Through Faith and Fears

The Humanities Center is pleased to display an exhibit featuring the work of four Latter-day Saint artists: James Rees, Jessica Day Smith, Sarah Schwieger, and Justin Wheatley. The exhibit was curated by Elizabeth Finlayson, a current BYU Comparative Studies MA student and a graduate of BYU's Art History & Curatorial Studies program.



Elizabeth was inspired to create this exhibit during a time when she found herself reevaluating her faith and sense of self. She shared the following reflection on her inspiration:

“There are two threads that run through our lives: one that we often use to hold ourselves back (our fears), and another that gives us strength and can act a lifeline (our faith). These strings are often messy and tangled, but act as ‘common threads’ that make us human and tie us all together. One thread alone may feel like it can easily break, but when we share stories of our fears and faith with our community, we weave each of our threads together, and they become significantly stronger. The process of overcoming grief and trials is both an individual and social experience—one that we must untangle and then weave together to see a bigger, more beautiful picture.”

The first piece Elizabeth selected was Sarah Schwieger’s Repair series—six deeply contemplative multimedia works that depict hands actively engaged with threads, working to mend their own canvas. The series captures the sometimes painful, messy, and yet colorful and varied process of piecing together one’s soul and sense of self. Speaking of both her artistic and healing process, Schwieger explained, “Some pieces to be repaired are kept, others are discarded. As the repair is made, there is a destruction and a creation.”



Repair VI from the Repair series by Sarah Schwieger



By Our Mother's Hand by Jessica Day Smith

Another piece that stood out to Elizabeth was Jessica Day Smith’s painting *By Our Mother’s Hand*, which portrays a young child sleeping peacefully beneath a large, vibrant patchwork quilt that blankets most of the canvas. She shared:

“I chose this piece because bedtime is often an occasion where children are afraid of being left alone and frightened by the unknown that lurks in the dark, yet Smith’s composition instead creates a moment of peace and tranquility that is clearly evident on the sleeping child’s expression. The quilt, made up of a multitude of various colorful shapes, has been stitched together by an adoring mother and offers the safety needed to drift into a land of dreams. To me, each piece of fabric represents the village it takes to raise a child, and how that love and support can help us work towards overcoming our fears to find moments of peace.”

The exhibit invites its viewers to sit with complexity, to notice the tension between faith and fear, and to contemplate the slow, imperfect work of repair. As we do, we might consider how our own stories could be stitched into something larger than ourselves—something enduring, resilient, and deeply human.

UNDERGRADUATE student symp



posium



On Friday, November 8, the BYU Humanities Center held our annual Undergraduate Research Symposium showcasing some of the finest student research from around the College. Every year, undergraduate students can apply for faculty-mentored research grants from the College of Humanities, called the Humanities Undergraduate Mentoring Grant (HUM Grant). The Humanities Center recognizes the very best of these recipients in our annual Undergraduate Research Symposium, where students from our college have a chance to present their research findings.

From left to right:

Jackson Hawkins — Philosophy

"Derrida and Testimonial Injustice: Putting Derrida into Conversation with Miranda Fricker"

Cannon Sharp — Comparative Literature

"No Physicians in those Parts: Folk Medicine in the Brazilian Colony through the Lens of Contemporary Colonial Literature"

Savannah Jepson — Linguistics

"An Analysis of English in the Uintah Basin"

Theresa Bell — Philosophy

"The Ethics of Fantasy"

Kaden Nelson — English

"The Politics of Devotion: National Identity in Mormon Victorian Poetry"

Eva Greenwell — French (not pictured)

"Mystere des Cles de Voute A La Cathedrale de Clermont"



El gozo es la gente con quien subimos la escalera

Written by Jane Henderson

Ross Gay said joy is “a room at the top of a flight of stairs.”

I was standing in a room in a community center in the middle of Herriman, Utah. It was warm with bodies. Colorful posters breathed life into concrete walls, and the air smelled like the pastries passed around at break time.

María Lionza stood by me. “Profe, thank you. See you the next week.”

“María Lionza! Thank you for coming.”

She started to leave but stopped.

“You good teacher. You, you—”

She switched to Spanish.

“You have good pedagogy. I was a teacher too, in a high school. Then I received a degree in administration. You can explain the same thing many ways so it is simple. Thank you for volunteering.”

I avoided the tears that pushed at the back of my eyes by looking at her Amazon sweatshirt. I thought about her coworkers, the ones that were always impatient and unkind to her. If she could learn English, she could get a better job—one where they didn’t mistreat her, where she didn’t have to spend long hours in a cold warehouse lifting boxes despite stiff joints, trying to work with people who pretended to not understand her.

Maybe joy is a room at the top of an impossibly steep flight of stairs.

“Thank you, María Lionza. I love being here. Thank you for coming even though it is hard.”

When she left, her overflowing tote on her shoulder, she passed Vicente in the hallway, his hair tied back to expose a forehead full of worry, but eyes that proved years of smiles. He was holding his young daughter; she embraced his neck and kissed his cheek. Sure enough, he smiled.

He left this home to bring her here. He left behind degrees and certifications in sociology, psychology, political science, and law to work a minimum wage job in the US so his daughter could live free of war and hunger. He worked all day, then brought her to the community center at night so that he could study English.

I turned away from the door, my throat tight.

Maybe joy is a room at the top of an impossibly steep, infinite flight of stairs.

My hands trembled as I erased the whiteboard, closed the computer cart, straightened the chairs. My tears had dried by the time I turned off the lights and left the room.

María Lionza should be a principal at a school nearby, helping children succeed. Vicente should be practicing law, guiding families like his to stability.

Maybe joy is a room at the top of an impossibly steep, infinite flight of stairs. (Continued on next page.)

People crowded the hallway. Students with arms full of books, children laughing as they searched for their parents, volunteers collecting binders and delivering welcoming reassurance. As I passed the office, I saw Anna.

"Jane! How was class?" Her smile was intense, and I wanted it to swallow me and soothe the ache. She looked at me. "Are you ok?"

Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry. "Our students just have really hard lives."

She hugged me. It was good.

Jeremías saw me. "Teacher!" His embrace smelled like earthy cologne and felt just as good as Anna's.

Leu, his wife, was there, and although her head barely reached my chest, her hug was firm and just about banished the ache. "Hola, preciosa."

Jeremías looked at Anna and pointed to me. "He is—"

His wife swatted his arm. "No, cariño, she, she."

"She is my first English teacher. My teacher in English and my teacher in Dios."

I responded to Anna's confused look. "I taught them on my mission."

"Oh, I didn't know you served here! How fun you get to keep seeing them."

Suddenly, "Profe!" I turned.

María Lionza was there, a loaf of bread now precariously balanced on her overflowing tote. Her teenage daughter was beside her. "Profe, she is my daughter." She pointed at me. "Mija, my English teacher."

"It's nice to meet you," the daughter said.

"You are so beautiful," I said. "You look so much like your mom."

They both grinned. I grinned. With classes ending and everyone pouring out of the classrooms and into the hallway, there were smiles and saludos and hugging and one pair was exchanging loaves of bread. It was good.

I said my goodbyes and found my car. I rested my head against the cold steering wheel and prayed. (Continued on next page.)

There were no words, just the crushing feeling in my ribs, and María Lionza and Vicente and Jeramías and Leu and their shining souls, and the souls of every student and every volunteer, and the fear. The fear. The anger. They deserve good lives. They deserve to be with their families. They deserve to not be followed by conflict and hatred. They are your children, God, and their lives are so hard. I love them, God, I love them. I know you do too. Without English and American degrees how can they climb the steep, infinite stairs to the room at the top?

Silence.

Then I saw in my heart some stairs. An infinite flight of stairs made of worn wood that disappeared into darkness above me. God was beside me, holding my hand, helping me lift my feet to the next step.

God pointed at the banister. “Beautiful. Such attention to detail.” The banister was also made of wood and hand-carved, some sections worn down by time and hands and others astonishingly detailed.

María Lionza was a few steps ahead of me. She turned. When she saw me, she grinned. She carefully made her way down to meet me, holding the banister that snaked its way into the darkness. She took my hands and looked into my eyes, reading my soul.

“Come,” she said. “Go together.”

“How far until we get to the room at the top?” I asked God.

With a strong hand on my shoulder, God looked around, prompting me to take in the crowd marching along the stairwell.

There were people all around me—people from the community center. I could see Anna up ahead, holding hands with a man, probably her husband. I watched as they turned and reached for people behind them on the stairs, descending to grab their hands and help pull them up.

Leu and Jeremías were there, holding each other. They did not try to keep up with those around them, but simply laughed and took their time.

Vicente and his daughter were sitting on a step. Vicente held his daughter to his chest, perhaps to protect her from the weariness in his face. Suddenly God was there, and Anna, too. Anna took the girl in her arms, and as she faced the climb, there was excitement in her movements.

Vicente shook with weeping in God’s embrace, but when he pulled away, he was smiling. He and God climbed together, catching up with Anna and the little girl, and the four of them slowly ascended.

Then God was beside me again. We climbed together, God on one side and María Lionza on the other.

God looked at me and asked, “What could a room offer that this journey cannot?”

So many people. Some struggled as they climbed, breathing hard and moving as if through sand. Laughter danced through the air and sank into my skin. Many stopped and rested. Someone was singing. I could hear brief moments of conversations filled with curiosity and fear and compassion.

Maybe joy is the people who climb the stairs with us.

Jane is a sociology student with a minor in TESOL. When the sun is shining, she’s probably climbing a mountain; when it’s not, she’s curled up with a book. She gravitates toward poetry but also has a soft spot for short fiction.

LOOKING AHEAD

2025 Symposium

Dates: September 18–19
Theme: "The Stories We Tell"



Translation Studies Research Group's Fall Symposium

Date: October 16–17
Theme: "Borges and Translation"

Education Week

Dates: August 18–22, 2025

Offered courses:

Spanish Studies

C.S. Lewis

Faith, Philosophy, and Contemporary Culture

My Five Best

Finding Christ in Inspiring Art

Nations, Kindreds, Tongues, and People:

Understanding Cultures from Around the World



REGISTER



Presentation
by the award-
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Karen Tei
Yamashita.

Date: December 4
@ 3pm

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Dean Scott Miller