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Introduction: Special Issue of Prize Winners from the Northwest Undergraduate Conference on Literature

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Abstract

The articles in this special issue represent five prizewinners from the Northwest Undergraduate Conference on Literature (NUCL), held on March 22, 2022 at the University of Portland. These research essays represent the wide range of periods and theoretical approaches that the conference addressed, as well as highlighting students' impressive, new contributions to ongoing conversations in literary analysis.

Keywords

Literary studies

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Introduction

This special issue celebrates work from the 2022 Northwest Undergraduate Conference on Literature (NUCL), which convened at the University of Portland on March 19, 2022. The conference was founded in 2004 by Herman Asarnow, professor emeritus of English, in response to a question from his school-aged daughter: why are there so many science fairs but no literature fairs? NUCL (affectionately pronounced “knuckle”) has been held annually ever since, offering students a venue in which to share their undergraduate research in the field of literature, as well as their original poetry and creative nonfiction. The conference has grown into one of the largest gatherings of its kind in the region, regularly drawing attendees from across the Pacific Northwest and farther afield. This year’s meeting welcomed student presenters from twenty-one different institutions. They shared their discoveries, asked insightful questions, and enjoyed an exhilarating and timely keynote address on the history and future of Indigenous Studies by Dr. Kimberly Takahata of Villanova University.

Each of the essays published here underwent a rigorous selection process. First, all submissions to the conference were chosen through a double-blind peer review by an evaluation committee comprising the English Department faculty at the University of Portland and several student readers. During this process, evaluators were asked to nominate outstanding submissions for award consideration. These, in turn, were re-assessed by an awards subcommittee of faculty and student readers who selected the five essays included in this special issue as the recipients of NUCL’s highest awards.

IJURCA is delighted to publish the prize-winning essays, which reflect the remarkable array of work students presented at NUCL. These compelling literary interpretations offer lucid, new analysis of subjects: from Old English poetry, to fiction of the Harlem Renaissance and modernist era, and contemporary drama. Each essay offers a specific contribution to ongoing scholarly conversations about the literary texts that they examine. Further the student authors engage a striking array of critical perspectives—shaped by work in science, religion, narratology, queer theory, race studies, and postcolonial theory—that render this collection of essays particularly relevant for our interdisciplinary journal.

Stephen Leach’s reading of *The Canterbury Tales* and Nikola Zupcic’s analysis of *Beowulf* both deploy perspectives on religious studies and historicist approaches to consider how these texts challenge their cultures’ histories of violence and preying on the vulnerable. In so doing, the authors invite us to recognize what such critiques might have to say about religious responses to our own cultural moment, including the Covid-19 pandemic. Riley Eyring’s essay on *Orlando* and Ella Soward’s interpretation of *Passing* attend to the queer themes in these texts, even as Eyring delves into the question of how shifting scientific conceptions of complementarity shape the chronological structure of Virginia Woolf’s work and Soward turns our attention to the complex question of how passing as white or straight affects members of the Black bourgeois in Larsen’s novel. McCalee Cain similarly draws on race and postcolonial studies to explore representations of racial and cultural assimilation in Ayad Ahktar’s recent play, *Disgraced*. Cain asks: what happens when the play’s characters first seem to reject the Orientalist stereotype of the violent Muslim and then seem to inhabit this trope? Not only do the authors present nuanced answers grounded in persuasive analysis, but the inquiries they pursue invite continued conversation.

We would like to thank all of the students for agreeing to share their essays, which we are confident will prove generative to *IJURCA*’s readership. We also greatly appreciate the impressive work of all of the student presenters and their mentors, the generous support of the University of Portland, and

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the dedication of NUCL's organizers, particularly the conference director, Dr. Joshua Swidzinski, and student interns Sadie Wuertz, Jamieson Miller, and Mia Tierney.