

**Charles Phelps Taft Research Center  
at the University of Cincinnati  
Center Fellowship Grant Application**

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Each section (I-IV) should be placed at the start of a new page. All required materials must be included in a single document, uploaded to the electronic submissions system, no later than 5PM on the published day of the deadline. Intradepartmental review and two external letters of support are required for this program. Applicants should submit their application with enough time to receive all letters of support prior to the close of the deadline. Taft does not accept an obligation to review applications that have not received the required letters of support by the close of the deadline.

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**I. General Information**

- a. Name: xxxxxxxx
- b. M#: XXXXXXXX
- c. Department: English
- d. Position: XXXXXXXXXX
- e. Project title: Rhetorical Practices of Mortuary Science
  
- f. Potential external funding that might arise from this project:

I will apply for an NEH Fellowship in April 2021.

- g. Intended results of a funded research, e.g., concrete plans for publication or conference presentations:

This research will result in a monograph about the rhetorical practices of death care workers.

**II. Taft Grant History**

Please list your grant history with Taft for the last 5 years, in reverse chronological order. Please list project title, the name, date, and amount of award, as well as development of the project subsequent to the grant, e.g. publication.

**Research Travel Grant, 2019**

Project Title:

Amount:

Publication Status:

**Competitive Lecture Fund, 2019**

Project Title:

Amount:

**Domestic Travel Funds**

**2019**

Project Title:

Amount:

Publication Status:

**2018**

Project Title:

Amount:

**2017**

Project Title: .

Amount:

**2016**

Project title:

Amount:

**Taft Summer Research Fellowship, 2015**

Project Title:

Amount:

### **III. Project Proposal**

#### **Title: Rhetorical Practices of Mortuary Science**

#### **Project Overview and Significance**

In the 1985 movie *St Elmo's Fire* Rob Lowe's character has dinner with his girlfriend's family. As the mother asks if they had heard the news about a particular friend, she announces in a whisper "cancer."<sup>1</sup> As this scene suggests, in American culture, difficult subjects like cancer or a family member's divorce are whispered about at best.

A similar response surrounds most Americans' reaction to death. Our contemporary anxiety about death is based on several social and cultural trends in the last century (Duktin, 2019). For example, in 1900 the average age of death was 47. Today it is 80. At the same time, in 1900, 53 percent of the population had an experience with someone 14 years old or younger dying. Now, because we are living longer, many people have no experience with death until much later in life. In addition, in the 1900s most people died at home. Children were around the dying as family members cared for them. Today, of course, the spaces in which death occurs are more removed – hospitals and hospice.

Together, these trends have made the experience of death one that is "other" than life rather than a part of it. As such, the materiality of death is shunned. As the rhetorical studies scholar Krista Ratcliffe notes, however, "we cannot escape materiality. We can only better define it, better critique it, and better engage it" (2002, p. 623).

My second book project, therefore, will explore how the materiality of corpses signify bodies of knowledge, bodies of matter (people and things), bodies of evidence, and embodied discourses. Scholarly work on the funeral industry and rituals associated with death has largely been the purview of sociologists and anthropologists in the past, but rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM) scholars have much to add to this subject in the effort to engage with the practices and discourses of death.

Scholarship situated in RHM focuses on understanding the effectiveness of discourse in medical and healthcare-related settings. This focus results in diverse research approaches (such as rhetorical analysis, ethnographic studies, content analysis, and interview studies) and topical focus (such as patient-provider communication or end-of-life discourse). Aside from Susan Wells's (2001) landmark book *Out of the Dead House* and T. Kenny Fountain's more recent and equally compelling *Rhetoric of the Flesh* (2014), both of which examine bodies in the context of medical education, scholars in RHM have limited end-of-life research to bodies that are still living (see Segal, 2000 and Keränen, 2007 for examples). And while this is a rich and rewarding vein of research for our field, discourses and practices surrounding death occur in the interdisciplinary spaces of legal, ethical, technical, and spiritual, spheres and, therefore, have the potential to question divisions between culture, biology, and technology (Boyle, 2018) in ways

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<sup>1</sup> The clip can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T48Zx5Ikz0>.

that offer interdisciplinary scholars insights into embodiment, material culture, and interdisciplinary expertise.

Using a historical and rhetorical and ethnographic approach my project explores these concepts through a study of the education and work of people in the funeral industry, including funeral directors, mortuary science college instructors and students, coroners, death doulas, and cemetery officials.

The book will specifically focus on the death care industry in the United States since the Civil War—a period that has seen significant technological, sociological, and cultural changes in the ways we talk about and interact with death. One of the most prominent changes involved the care of the dead shifting from a domestic task to a technological one because Northern soldiers dying on Southern soil needed preservation in order to be sent home to be viewed by the families (Faust, 2008). In the initial months many of the dead were also a public health threat, and both the North and South ordered military hospitals to set up burial grounds as well as “dead houses,” where corpses would be stored prior to burial for post-mortem exams. As the war escalated and troops moved, these efforts became inadequate. Furthermore, as the war continued, more and more families wanted to ship their dead loved ones home for burial (Faust, 2008). Because of this desire, embalming became a standard practice during the war. After the war, embalming became a more wide-spread practice in general, and this technological procedure served as the foundation for the emergence of the funeral industry and the professionalization of the undertaker (Faust, 2008).

Drawing on an interdisciplinarity theoretical framework which includes classical rhetorical theory, posthumanism, and feminist embodiment theory, this project aligns with the work of philosopher of science Annemarie Mol. In her examination of atherosclerosis in *The Body Multiple* (2002), she makes the radical argument for decentering the object rather than the subject. She views the act of decentering subjects as a form of ‘perspectivalism’ that assumes there are different views of a single, unified object. But, she argues, objects exist in multiple situated practices. Viewing post-mortem bodies not as distinct objects but as part of multiple practices can inform how scholars in RHM, and the humanities and social sciences more generally, approach ideas about identity, agency, emotions, work, ethics, bodies, and expertise, and gender. More specifically, Mol’s emphasis on practice and enactment can get to the essential questions my work addresses: What is the rhetorical power of the post-mortem bodies? If all bodies have rhetorical power, how do deceased ones connect individuals and groups to others in complex arrangements or “multiple arrays of practice” (Boyle, 2018, p. 5)?

## Taft Center Environment

As demonstrated in my previous scholarship and research activities, I am deeply invested in interdisciplinary research both from a theoretical and methodological standpoint. My past work has involved collaborating with physicians as well as social scientists. This particular project will offer an opportunity to delve into research with clinicians and social scientists as well, but it will also draw on conversations with and expertise from the fields of religion, law, and ethics. The Taft Center is an excellent resource and space for such interdisciplinary exchanges of ideas.

## **References**

- Boyle, C. (2018). *Rhetoric as a posthuman practice*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press.
- Duktin, T. (2019, September 13). Personal interview.
- Faust, D. G. (2008). *This Republic of suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Fountain, T. K. (2014). *Rhetoric in the flesh: Trained vision, technical expertise, and the gross anatomy lab*. New York: NY, Routledge.
- Keränen, L. (2007). “Cause Someday We All Die”: Rhetoric, agency, and the case of the “patient” preferences worksheet. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 93(2), 179-210.
- Mol, A. (2002). *The body multiple: Ontology in medical practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. (NYSFDA, 2019)
- Ratcliffe, K. (2002). Material matters: Bodies and rhetoric. *College English*, 64(5), 613-623.
- Segal, J. Z. (2000). Contesting death, speaking of dying. *Journal of Medical Humanities* 21(1), 29-44.
- Wells, S. (2001). *Out of the dead house: Nineteenth-century women physicians and the writing of medicine*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

## **Project schedule**

Fall 2020:

- Finish data analysis of texts and interviews
- Write NEH Fellowship application
- Draft book proposal, Introduction, and Chapter 1

Spring 2021:

- Draft Chapters 2-5
- Submit NEH Fellowship application

## **Results and Impact of Fellowship**

This research will result in a monograph that I intend to submit to Routledge Press.

#### **IV. Curriculum Vitae**

