Tim Brown awarded National Humanities Without Walls PreDoctoral Fellowship

Submitted by Katherine Ellen Goldyn on January 18, 2017 - 11:23am

Congratulations to philosophy graduate student Tim Brown, who has been selected as one of the inaugural National Humanities Without Walls PreDoctoral Fellows. The fellows receive a generous stipend to attend the 2017 Humanities Without Walls PreDoctoral Summer Workshop which will take place in Chicago for three weeks this summer.

Humanities Without Walls (HWW) is an initiative by a consortium of humanities centers based in 15 research universities throughout the Midwest, which was launched with the support of a sizable grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The stated mission of HWW is “to create new avenues for collaborative research, teaching, and the production of scholarship in the humanities, forging and sustaining areas of inquiry that cannot be created or maintained without cross-institutional cooperation.

As part of this initiative, HWW hosts summer workshops for pre-doctoral students to explore careers outside the academy. Whereas in the first two years of the initiative, the workshops were open only to students from the 15 consortium institutions, 2017 will be the inaugural summer of an expanded national meeting of pre-doctoral students in Chicago. The final 30 fellows were selected from a pool of nominees from humanities centers across the United States – each allowed to nominate only one student to represent their institution. Graduate students in this program will engage in intensive discussions with organizers of public humanities projects, leaders of university presses and learned societies, and experts in digital humanities, as well as representatives from governmental and non-governmental organizations. Tim Brown rose to the top in three rounds of competitive nominations—at the department, campus, and national levels—in order to finally be selected as one of the 30 inaugural national HWW summer fellows.

The transdisciplinary nature of Tim’s research in the ethics of neuroscience and neural engineering is a perfect fit for this workshop. Tim’s current project studies the way people with Parkinson’s Disease and Essential Tremor use deep-brain stimulator systems – where a pacemaker-like device implanted in the user’s chest applies electricity to electrodes implanted in the user’s brain – to manage their symptoms. Devices like these may have the potential to profoundly change the user’s sense of self, feelings of self-control, or even their interpersonal relationships with family and friends. Tim collects the users’ experiences through interviews and uses them to challenge philosophical theories about autonomy, self-control, and personal identity. He conducts this research as part of the Neuroethics Thrust – a group of philosophers and other neuroethicists at the UW’s Center for Sensorimotor Neural Engineering (CSNE), a National Science Foundation-funded organization that guides research on computers that record from and stimulate the brain and spinal cord.

Though his advisors from the Department of Philosophy and the CSNE assure Tim that his research offers valuable contributions to a relatively novel, transdisciplinary field, he recognizes that it is difficult to devise a clear career trajectory given how new the field is, and how non-traditional neuroethics careers have been so far. His advisors in philosophy have taken steps to prepare him for tenure-track positions in philosophy departments, and this is the route he had imagined for himself until recently. However, his collaborators outside of philosophy are confident that he can try for positions within the medical devices industry, independent research groups, philanthropic organizations, and government agencies. This is less-familiar territory for him, and he is learning the terrain the hard way: by networking with corporations, private researchers, and community organizations. Tim’s mentors and collaborators offer helpful advice, but they also struggle to help him prepare for a transdisciplinary humanities career. The Humanities Without Walls Predoctoral Workshop would be the perfect opportunity to fill the gaps in his knowledge both about alternative careers in academia and careers outside of academia entirely, while sharing his own hard-won experience with peers from across the county.

The Department of Philosophy is particularly pleased that Tim has been selected as a HWW Predoctoral Summer Fellow because the aims of the workshop align perfectly with our own project to reimagine how our graduate program prepares our students for professional success. We are currently working on a project Philosophy Branches Out—generously supported by the Simpson Center for the Humanities—to explore how philosophy is being used beyond the academy while broadening our networks of collaboration across and beyond the University of Washington.
We are proud that Tim will be representing our department and the University of Washington at the first national HWW summer workshop for exploring non-academic careers for humanities PhDs. We know that he will be a valuable contributor to the important discussions to be held there, and we know his experience will benefit others in our department and across campus upon his return. Congratulations, Tim!

People Involved:
Timothy Emmanuel Brown

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