

Welcome
“Time Will Tell, But Epistemology Won’t”:
A Celebration of Richard Rorty’s Archive

Elizabeth Losh
May 14, 2010

For a conference that concerns itself with digital archives, among other things, Richard Rorty’s words about how “time will tell but epistemology won’t” seem particularly appropriate for a project that is implicated in both preservation for posterity and practices of knowledge-making and representation.

Treated as an aphorism, Rorty’s line makes for a great conference title, but it is worth noting the context in which it originally appears: a section about what Rorty calls “silly relativisms” in *Objectivity, relativism, and truth* in which he cautions against leaping to an assertion that there is “no objective criterion of choice” merely because there is “no epistemological difference” to be claimed.

As we discuss today the possibilities and pitfalls of taking a critical theory archive and eventually transforming it into a critical theory digital archive, it is worth noting that Rorty is not alone in having had his scholarly work misunderstood and often taken as the very kind of “silly relativism” to which he so strongly objected.

Of course, looking through Rorty’s electronic files one comes across all kinds of digital ephemera: sign-in sheets, inventories, and even typing drills. A few weeks ago, Bruce Sterling opined in *Wired*, that the creators of this conference might be treating Rorty as a mere “digital theory object” to be processed in a metaphorical “sausage machine.” I think that we are actually trying to do something very different here, by looking critically at the computational machines that process scholarship and our lived experiences of reading, writing, and reflecting with an appreciation for Rorty the person, the philosopher, and the public intellectual. Like many who saw Rorty speak at UC Irvine in the nineties, sitting around a seminar table in a setting that was much more intimate than the room we occupy at this moment, I would like to celebrate his archive in the spirit of a lively discussion. The three parts of the day, which can be roughly divided into presentations about the digital humanities, Rorty’s philosophy, and Rorty’s public rhetoric, are meant to challenge those divisions and to encourage members of the audience to feel like they are part of richer interdisciplinary conversation about pragmatism, anti-foundationalism, and the archive.

One encounters many signs that Rorty remains profoundly relevant to the university itself for many reasons. Many years before books like *The Marketplace of Ideas* or *The Last Professors* made their debuts, Rorty was keenly concerned with the self-justification of the intelligentsia. As Rorty wrote in 1997, “These sinister forces will do their best to portray us as sex-crazed readers of irrationalist French philosophy, and therefore bad candidates for places at the public trough. But no matter how we are portrayed, we are in a weak position, for there is a plausible argument that the country has too many humanities teachers.”

Rorty remains remarkably current in many other ways. A new book, *An Ethics for Today: Finding Common Ground Between Philosophy and Religion*, which will be out from Columbia University Press in Fall is likely to draw many readers. In the forthcoming *The Googolization of Everything*, Siva Vaidhyanathan argues that

understanding Rorty's ideas also helps us understand the forms of "truth" that we have naturalized in our own contemporary Internet culture.

Although Vaidhyanathan can not be with us today, we have assembled a group of scholars who are interested in keeping Rorty relevant both in academia and in civic life. It is a group that includes not only professors who write for mainstream publications, as Rorty did, but also academic bloggers, philosophers who participate in film-making projects, and archivists involved in public policy and outreach.

Obviously I have a long list of thank yous for an ambitious conference that came together in a remarkably short time despite crippling budget cuts thanks to a veritable army of enthusiastic supporters. First off, thanks go to my conference co-organizer, Erin Obodiac, who will be presenting later this morning. As signs indicate, this conference was first made possible by the UCI Humanities Center, which is part of the Humanities Collective, an important source of funding for twenty-first century initiatives on this campus. Personal thanks to friend and colleague Professor Catherine Liu for directing a capacious project toward concrete deliverables and to Marites Santiago for logistical help with the event.

The UCI Libraries were also early to offer their financial support and their expertise about speakers who could address contemporary debates in archival design. The UCI Department of Philosophy was a significant contributor, one that decorated its entire building with posters to get out the word. I am particularly grateful to Professor David Smith for his many contributions in orchestrating the philosophy portions of the day.

The Department of Comparative Literature also provided funding, as did the Critical Theory Emphasis. Special thanks to Professor Rei Terada for making it possible. The Office of the Campus Writing Coordinator supported this event with eleventh hour funding. Thanks to Professor Jonathan Alexander and to Iveta Cruse. We were lucky to have several volunteers, all of whom are bloggers, I must note, so check them out on the web: Scott Eric Kaufman for transportation, Mel Horan for graphics, and graduate students Jana Remy and Ali Meghdadi, who you will hear later in the day. I would be remiss if I didn't mention my own academic unit, The Humanities Core Course, and our fabulous MSO, Suzanne Bolding, who came in today despite it being a furlough day for her. Like Suzanne, Arielle Read also provided critical support services on behalf of one of our major backers, the UC Systemwide Humanities Research Institute.

Thus, I am very pleased to introduce the Director of UCHRI, Professor David Theo Goldberg. Professor Goldberg is also the Director of the national Digital Media and Learning Hub, who has written about political theory, ethics, law and society, critical theory, cultural studies and, increasingly, the digital humanities. In imagining this conference about Richard Rorty's archive, we asked participants to address a number of questions, the last of which was "How can more dialogue between critical theory and the digital humanities be fostered?" I am delighted to turn over the podium to Professor Goldberg to begin the day's discussion, because he has facilitated this conversation on the national and international scale for many years now.