

Imagining Scientific Form
Debapriya Sarkar and Jenny C. Mann
SAA 2016

Introduction to Using Google Docs for SAA Seminars

There is some "front end" work that needs to be done on the part of the seminar leader who chooses to use google docs (which is probably fairly evident in my messages), but the pay-off of an hour or two was absolutely worth it in the end. I had several participants write and thank me for the streamlined approach and user-friendliness of google docs, as well as several in-person discussions about how it made exchanges much easier. I was paying close attention to this because I wasn't sure at the outset if it would, indeed, work, and am glad to report that it did.

Another quick anecdote: I had one participant, while attempting to delete his own paper from the file, deleted the entire "seminar papers" folder. He sent me a panicked email, and with two clicks, I was able to restore it without any issues! That function does not exist in Dropbox, so I was quite thankful for my "administrative" google docs power of restoration!

Letters to Participations

Dear Colleagues,

We are pleased to welcome you to the SAA seminar on "Imagining Scientific Form"! We are looking forward to our collaboration in the coming months, culminating in the meeting in New Orleans in March. We are writing now to share further information about the topic, and also to communicate details about the work and deadlines for the seminar.

First, here is a copy of the seminar as we proposed it to the SAA Program Committee last spring:

Imagining Scientific Form

This seminar will explore the ways in which the field of literature and science—including its engagement with the history of science, science and technology studies, and philosophy of science—intersects with the renewed focus in literary studies on aesthetic forms and "new formalisms." Recent studies argue that both poesy and natural philosophy are *technés* that produce authoritative knowledge about the body, the state, and the natural world. According to this research, composing a poem, producing a play, and conducting an experiment are parallel endeavors that result in formal "inventions." Recovering the symbiotic relationships between pre-modern literature and natural philosophy (represented best by the decade-long Ashgate series *Literary and Scientific Cultures of Early Modernity*) and uncovering the imaginative techniques pervading scientific methods (as in Elizabeth Spiller's *Science, Reading and Renaissance Literature*), this research has demonstrated that science studies is inextricable from considerations of aesthetic form.

Early modern writers draw on a range of classical concepts of form, including the Platonic theory of Forms, Aristotelian hylomorphism, Lucretian materialism, and Pythagorean physics. In this seminar, we aim to wed these varied “scientific” or “philosophical” conceptions of form with the early modern arts of poetics and rhetoric. By placing form at the center of discussions in literature and science, the seminar hopes to complicate the so-called “return to form” that has marked recent scholarship in literary studies.

We invite participants to reflect upon the philosophical constitution of their own formalisms. How do dramatists and poets deploy scientific notions of form in imaginative works? Conversely, how do literary forms—from the macro-level of genres to the micro-level of figures of speech—shape practices in natural philosophy? Might form enable us to connect imaginative and natural knowledges that elude familiar paradigms? Papers may focus on: reflections on form in Shakespeare and his contemporaries; explorations of the concept of form in natural philosophy; methodological approaches to literature and science; considerations of “new formalism” in relation to science studies, object criticism, and forms of “new materialisms.”

Here are some further questions we hope our papers and conversations might consider:

1. Since form is such an expansive and abstract concept, it would be beneficial for us to define how each of us approaches and uses this term in our own work. How do we use “form” specifically in imaginative frameworks? And how does our use of the term in literary contexts intersect with or differ from how we use the phrase “scientific form”?
2. “Form” serves as a principle of demarcation and classification in a range of disciplines and fields of study. By focusing on its intersections in literature and science, can we outline a theory of form that is inclusive rather than exclusionary? And would such a focus help us think differently about the philosophical and disciplinary constitutions of our own approaches to formalist practices?
3. Scientific and philosophical notions of “form” are often defined through their oppositions to other capacious concepts such as “matter” or “spirit.” Can these concepts help reorient discussions of form and formalism in literary studies, which deals with its own sets of oppositions to formalist approaches (such as historicism, theory, etc.)?

Seminar Work and Deadlines:

1. **By return email to everyone** (send this to the entire seminar, using reply all), please introduce yourself and say something about your interest in our subject and in this seminar. Please write to the group in the next two weeks so that we know you have received this email.

We’ve attached a list of seminar members with the contact information that we received from SAA: please let us know if you need me to make any corrections to your information.

2. **By Friday, December 4th** please upload a title and brief (150-200 word) description of your topic to the dropbox site for the seminar. (We will share access to the dropbox folder later this fall.)
3. **By Wednesday, February 10th**, please upload **your final paper (3,000 words max)** and **your final abstract (150-200 words)** to the dropbox site. Please be aware that the SAA will remove from the seminar all members who have not completed the seminar requirements by February 15th.
4. **By Monday, March 7th**, please upload reading responses to two pre-assigned papers (about 1 single-spaced page) as well as 1-2 general questions you think that the seminar might take up and 1-2 secondary sources to include in a bibliography for the seminar. (We will match you with two colleagues before this deadline--our hope is to have the groupings for the response assignments to everyone on or before February 15th.) We will circulate the discussion questions and bibliography of secondary sources on Monday, March 14th.
5. At SAA, **March 24th – 27th**, we'll focus our discussion on the common themes and divergences that have emerged out of the papers and responses. Depending on our seminar schedule, we will plan to arrange some kind of social gathering—ideally, drinks before the seminar—so that everyone can talk outside the seminar time.

We look forward to meeting all of you and learning more about your work!

Best,

Debapriya Sarkar
Assistant Professor
Department of English, Hendrix College
Sarkar@hendrix.edu

Jenny C. Mann
Associate Professor
Department of English, Cornell University
jenny.mann@cornell.edu