

Documenting Research: Why I'm Making a Film About a Woman's Ascent of Katahdin in 1849

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ABSTRACT

This is a presentation explaining my path from “research” to demonstration—from studying and writing about literary texts and presenting that work in conference papers or in published articles, to exploring one such text I have until now only written about *as material culture*, and producing a film that might do the same intended work more effectively. Last year I applied for a COR grant to carry out this latter project, focusing on a single moment in the career of a literary figure I've studied over the past 30 years, Elizabeth Oakes Smith. My presentation will, if nothing else, document my work to date on this project, along with plans for its completion. I will end by showing the latest draft of the three-minute trailer I've developed so far (easily exhausting my COR Grant money and some more) that will serve as evidence of the project's potential beyond any written summary: material evidence (the kind of proof an explorer to a new land might bring back) that might attract additional grant funding to complete the film.

I'm sure attendees will be most interested in the story—the “how we did what we did,” and that will occupy most of the presentation. But I will begin with a reflection on a broad issue bearing on academic research today: is the *form* in which academic professionals have traditionally shared their work—the written essay or monograph—now hopelessly behindhand? Of course the most philosophically sophisticated leaders in my own field have been debating this sort of thing *in essays* since the 1960s, but until recently, few moves have been made *in our discipline* to actually change the way we share our knowledge (cue that tiny note in our English Department DAC about “using current technology”). These moves have been made possible, of course, by the digital age, in which multi-modal information sharing has—in a single decade—opened up a whole range of new possibilities to engage broader audiences with a new immediacy. The present project shows my attempts to move in this direction and take advantage of the relative ease and vastly reduced cost of sharing information digitally, along with the challenges of translating the content of my research into a new form.

The remainder of the talk will involve slides and video showing what it takes to document a signal moment—really 10 days—in the life of a fascinating literary figure whose career spanned eight decades; why I chose this moment in her life to focus upon; and what difficulties needed to be surmounted along the way.