

RESEARCH STATEMENT

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*I love above all the sight of vegetation resting upon
old ruins; this embrace of nature, coming swiftly
to bury the work of man the moment
his hand is no longer there to defend it,
fills me with deep and ample joy.*
(Gustave Flaubert, letter to a friend, 1846)

Detroiters hate what they call "ruin porn." And it's understandable the unease and even anger that must come with seeing tourists, gawkers, (and television crews) come to your city to pose giddily in front of abandoned factories, public buildings, the symbols of former empire.
(Anthony Bourdain, *Parts Unknown*)

At first blush, Flaubert's fascination with ruins might seem itself an artifact of a bygone era. Yet the contemplation of ruins, their meaning and their beauty, is still very much alive. In the past few years there has been a surge of this "ruinlust,"¹ especially in the United States. Photographers and photojournalists have flocked to modern ruins; the resulting photographs have been labeled "ruin porn."² Ruin tours for aspiring photographers have surfaced in economically hard hit cities, such as Detroit. The question remains, why—if *ruinlust* was just a product of the eighteenth century obsession with the picturesque—are we still intrigued by ruins? In my research I aim to explain our peculiar aesthetic fascination with architectural ruins and to show why ruins are worthy of our time and aesthetic appreciation. I propose a model of aesthetic appreciation specific to ruins, one that not only presents a methodology of interpreting and evaluating ruins, but also suggests how we ought to preserve and display these objects of immovable material culture. An offshoot of this research has been published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Fall 2104), in a paper titled "Unimagined Beauty."

My work on ruins is part of my larger goal to provide practical arguments in support of the preservation of material culture. While I believe that we must allow ruins to decay to preserve their aesthetic integrity, I do not believe that all historic buildings should be allowed to rinate. We must balance aesthetic concerns with historic preservation, economic development, and ethical concerns, such as those that arise from tourism. Historic preservation has obvious implications for tourism. How do we limit access to the site to prevent damage? Who should have access to the site? Should historic buildings be preserved as something static, or as part of a living culture?³

My research around historical preservation has given rise to a related interest in the ethics of travel and tourism. I am currently working on a paper discussing whether UNESCO's "World Heritage" designation does more harm than good to historical sites. In another work-in-progress ("Visiting the Ruins of Detroit"), I discuss the increasingly popular tours of contemporary rust belt ruins, comparing and contrasting these ruin tours with "poorism," i.e., slum tours. I address why slum tours make us ethically queasy, and whether ruin tours should be viewed similarly. The ethics of tourism is an underdeveloped but important area of study. Most people engage in tourism in one form or another, and many of us have the bulk of our aesthetic experiences while on vacation. We tour museums, visit historic towns, and relax on beautiful beaches. In my recent work I examine some of the darker aspects of tourism, such as the inherent exploitation involved in these slum tourism.

My interest in preserving material culture extends from preserving tangible material culture (including ruins), to the preservation of the intangible. New EU regulations which ban some iconic perfume ingredients (e.g., oak moss) have forced perfumers to make hard choices about what constitutes a perfume's identity.⁴ As with ruins and historic cities, the "authenticity" of some iconic perfumes, some of whose formulations have been static for 150 years, will increasingly be called into question.

My inquiry into perfume overlaps with my interest in and research on the aesthetics of everyday life. Traditionally aesthetics has been divided into philosophy of art and aesthetics of nature (I teach in both areas). In the last 15 years a new area of aesthetics has emerged that deals with more common aesthetic experiences, such as the aesthetics of weather, fashion, and food. My research interest in this emerging area is motivated in part by my interest in feminist philosophy. The division between art and craft is fraught with gendered implications. I have continued to explore and refine my academic interest in feminist theory, including feminist aesthetics. Philosophers at the forefront of the emergence of everyday aesthetics believe the everyday has been overlooked due in part to its association with the feminine—cooking, perfume, etc. My review of Peg Zeglin Brand's *Beauty Unlimited*, published in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, addresses this oversight, highlighting the importance of discussing the beauty of the body and feminist and critical race critiques of bodily beauty.

¹ "Ruinlust," taken from the German "*ruinenlust*," is a term first used in English by Dame Rose Macaulay in *Pleasure of Ruins* (1953).

² These images have been labeled pornographic because many believe they are exploitative. For some interesting, mainstream articles on this phenomenon see:

CNN: http://articles.cnn.com/2010-11-10/us/detroit.environment_1_motor-city-detroit-free-press-figure?_s=PM:US

The New York Times: <http://6thfloor.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/02/pushback-on-ruin-porn-of-detroit/>

The Huffington Post: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ian-ference/on-ruin-porn_b_816593.html

³ These are just some of the issues for immovable material culture. Movable material culture (e.g. paintings, sculptures) raises similar issues, as well as a complex set of other issues related to portability, such as repatriation of artifact debates (e.g., Elgin Marbles), and issues surrounding the ethics of museum collecting. I am very interested in the regionalist / universalist museum debate. I presented a paper arguing in favor of regionalist museums at the *Cosmopolitan Rights and Responsibility Conference* (University of Washington, 2012).

⁴ For more information on the EU ban, see: www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/07/us-perfume-regulation-insight-idUSKBN0FC0EB20140707.