

March 6, 2025

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing as a faculty mentor on behalf of Clayton Heath for the consideration of his research project for this year's College of Creative Arts and Media Mentored Research Award. Having previously worked with Clayton on a mentored research project, it has been my pleasure to do so again. Clayton's projects, which are closely connected to the localities in which he resides, display not only a breadth of research and methodology, but also an ability to engage with a wide demographic from students, artists, and composers to local and scholarly communities. His work has consistently been outstanding in ways it brings peripheral practices and narratives to the forefront in collaboration and conversation with current spaces and networks. Much of my role has consisted of supporting and guiding further considerations throughout the research process.

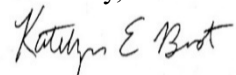
While Clayton began working on this project last spring, my role as a faculty mentor in relation to this project began when Clayton enrolled in MUSC 470E, a Musics of the Americas course focusing on music and belonging in the United States that I taught in the fall of 2024. Much of the literature we examined, discussions we had, and theoretical frameworks we covered informed Clayton's research approach and analysis of literature, art, and other media that have contributed to the formation of the mythos surrounding John Henry as an icon of American folklore. Within this context, Clayton examined different ways meaning has been assigned to the figure of John Henry through landmark works. As he compiled his research, we discussed the effectiveness of using specific works as case studies for his analysis. Through this investigation, Clayton has been able to highlight how different representations, which contribute to the larger folklore of John Henry, are in conversation with a range of contexts, ideologies, histories, and social dynamics within the United States.

As Clayton worked on research, we also discussed the wide reach of this project. Clayton's initiative to work outside of the confines of one space significantly contributes to the impact this work has. To begin with, he commissioned "More Than a Man" by Shanyse Strickland, which promotes a new work grounded within the community of which John Henry is a part. This piece not only provides a way to connect members of the community through performance, but also introduce people to this project, allowing them to more deeply engage with the figure and folklore of John Henry within the context of a contemporary musical performance. Through this project, Clayton is also engaging with the WVU School of Art and Design and the Gramlee Collection making further connections within the community and across media. In addition to this, Clayton has focused on disseminating his research in a number of ways. One of these forms is through a blog. In relation to this, we discussed language and structure based on a targeted audience that extends outside of academic circles. In juxtaposition to this, we also discussed how to structure this research for academic settings and relevant conferences such as the American Folklore Society or the Society of American Music. In the meantime, Clayton will be presenting his work at the Appalachian Studies Association, the American Trombone Workshop, and the International Women's Brass Conference.

Ultimately, this project brings a regional figure to the forefront through composition, art, performance, literature, and research and involves a network of people and spaces to do so. Through interdisciplinary engagement, Clayton highlights mechanisms at play that shape the folklore of John Henry and explores this through writing, teaching, and performance. As such, this work is deserving of recognition for its significant cultural and educational impact.

Thank you for your consideration of this award. If you have any questions or if I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to reach out and contact me.

Sincerely,



Dr. Katelyn Best  
Teaching Assistant Professor of Musicology  
West Virginia University