

Final Written Report

Professional Development Grant

“The Monstrous Queer in Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits*”

May 2013

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This final report addresses the results of a professional enhancement project funded by an ATU Professional Development Grant. This report follows the instructions provided in the Guidelines for Professional Development Grants.

A. Title Page (see above)

B. Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

Abstract of conference paper presented:

Southern literary scholarship has paid a great deal of attention to ways the female body has been constructed as monstrous, particularly in Faulkner studies, and that monstrousness is inevitably tied to her body as specifically sexualized. At the 1980 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, southern writer Ellen Douglas delivered a blistering elaboration of what she sees as a virulent hatred of women apparent throughout the Faulkner canon. In a society that “defined [women] as almost exclusively sexual,” she goes on to insist that the evil women in his work are evil primarily because of their sexuality, rather than as individuals, concluding that, “By Faulkner’s lights we can and must be blamed *as women* for just about everything.” Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine* makes clear that the equation of female sexuality and intrinsic evil is far more than a Faulknerian, or even southern, obsession. I want to expand such concerns, specifically in southern literature, to include an analysis of queer sexuality. Randall Kenan has been called a “gay Faulkner” by virtue of similar themes complicated by black homosexuality. *A Visitation of Spirits* offers the opportunity to analyze the character of Horace Cross, a closeted young man in North Carolina who is situated on the margins of race and sexuality, and who becomes a monstrous body striving to come out of the closet.

Horace is constructed as monstrous within multiple discourses: heteronormative, religious (in this novel, Baptist), and regionally raced. A primary signifier of that monstrosity is the collection of posters in his bedroom: superheroes and fantasy figures that, according to Brannon Costello, represent the “highly vexed issue of embodiment” and Horace’s sense that he cannot control his own body. Some of these figures, like the Hulk, experience monstrous, uncontrollable transformations into anything but the clean and proper body, becoming instead what Judith Halberstam calls a condensation of racial and sexual threats (*Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*). Horace’s failed repression of his sexual identity renders him monstrous, transforming him from the “Chosen Nigger” of his family and community into a psychotic believing himself demon-possessed and capable of beheading his condemning pastor. Although his dark night of the soul ends in self-destruction, Horace can nonetheless be read as what Harry Benshoff describes as a “monster queer,” a “sexual outlaw, a counter-hegemonic figure who forcefully smashes the binary oppositions of gender and sexuality and race” (*Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*).

#### C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the American Literature Association in Boston, MA, chaired a panel, and presented my paper there. I flew out of Little Rock on May 22, 2013, and returned on May 27, 2013.

#### D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is modern and southern American. I am the primary teacher of Modern American Literature, a required course for all our majors, and the only teacher of our course on southern literature. Not only did I receive much positive feedback on my paper, I was also able to attend numerous other panels relevant to my teaching and scholarship. In addition, I chaired a panel, "Queer Figures of the Gothic." The panelists are major scholars of the American Gothic (the three of them, together, have published 7 books), and asked me to chair because of their interest in my work.

#### E. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper is part of a larger project. I have written on the monstrous-feminine before, and even on the queer Gothic elements in Ellen Douglas's *A Lifetime Burning*, but this is the first time I've written about a gay, male, and African-American "monstrous." Nor have I ever written about Randall Kenan until now. Without the funds I received from the ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend the conference.