

Final Written Report

2018 Professional Development Grant

“The De/Historicized Body in Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits*”

Prepared September 2018

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This final report addresses the results of a professional research 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:

Michel Foucault's essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" offers an appropriate theoretical frame for Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*. In Foucault's schema, the "genealogist" rejects the metaphysical search for pre-existent truth: "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of things. It is disparity." Foucault's genealogist/historian "recognizes the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats" rather than seeking some unbroken continuity. This history, which Foucault labels *descent*, would "discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents." Such a history "attaches itself to the body . . . which manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires, failings, and errors." Those elements may be expressed through the body, but usually "their encounter is an engagement in which they efface each other, where the body becomes the pretext of their insurmountable conflict."

Kenan's central protagonist, Horace Cross, is an African American gay man whose intellectual brilliance is expected to eradicate the historical shame of slavery and solidify his family's entrenched status as Baptist middle class. But he faces an insurmountable conflict, caught between his embodied desire as a gay man and his paradoxical desire to become, through magical ritual and incantation, a red-tailed hawk rather than a human—a hawk, still embodied, yet whose only desire seems to be predatory sustenance rather than sexual satisfaction. His sexuality marks him as unnatural, ahistorical, an aberration from the teleological, apocalyptic Biblical narrative his family believes. His final night is an episodic retrospective based on the exteriority of accidents rather than the continuity of a return to origins.

He finds no unifying narrative either in his family's history or the church's narrative. He disintegrates into an ahistorical body whose mind denies his own identity, then fragments into a mob of inhuman, fantastical, mythical creatures, until he finally shoots himself outside the high school that was to have provided an alternative redemptive path. The desire to escape history (racial, regional, and personal), to escape even through ahistorical embodiment, leaves him imprisoned in a body that must be destroyed.

C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the American Literature Association Annual Conference in San Francisco and presented my paper there. I flew from Fayetteville, AR, to San Francisco on May 23 and returned on May 28, 2018.

D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is American, primarily modern and southern. I first taught this novel in southern literature but have recently included it in my modern American literature survey, since I believe its significance makes it more than a regional text. The positive feedback I received on my paper will not only help in expanding my teaching of both southern and American literature, but also in my ongoing research in both areas. I was also able to attend numerous other panels relevant to my teaching and scholarship.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

Working on this paper contributed to my teaching over the summer (an online graduate course) and this semester. This semester I am teaching an undergraduate version of the course. The title of the course comes from a book I used in my research for the paper, *Undead Souths*. Without the funds I received from the ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend the conference.