

Professional Development Grant Report

“Tattooed Vikings, Racial Nostalgia, and the Imaginary Middle Ages,”

American Comparative Literature Society Annual Meeting

UCLA

30 March – 1 April 2018

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Restatement of professional enhancement opportunity

I traveled to the American Comparative Literature Association conference held at UCLA in March-April 2018 and presented a paper as part of a multi-session seminar titled *Tattoos as/in Literature: Beyond the Semiotic and the Bodily*.

Brief review of the professional enhancement opportunity

My paper, “Tattooed Vikings, Racial Nostalgia, and the Imaginary Middle Ages,” was accepted by the American Comparative Literature Association for presentation as a part of the conference seminar *Tattoos as/in Literature: Beyond the Semiotic and the Bodily*, a series of panels across two days with papers on the same topic. (The relevant page from the conference program is included below; the full program can be viewed at: [https://www.acla.org/sites/default/files/files/ACLA_2018_Print_Guide_137686_Text_Proof%20Low\(1\).pdf](https://www.acla.org/sites/default/files/files/ACLA_2018_Print_Guide_137686_Text_Proof%20Low(1).pdf) .)

My paper addresses the representation of Old Norse culture, and especially Old Norse bodies, on the popular television show *Vikings*, in connection with the appropriation of medieval imagery and ideas by those invested in a fantasized, racially “pure” past. Old Norse narratives and culture have been a particularly potent site for such appropriation; my paper examines this television depiction to consider how these representations intersect with such modern political uses. I consider the use of tattooing specifically because, although there is no evidence that the Norse practiced tattooing, tattoos are used here to suggest a type of belligerent masculinity, a shared cultural identity inscribed on the skin; this is an ahistorical usage that intersects clearly with the Viking-themed tattoos popular among young American and Europeans who join white supremacist movements. My paper explores those intersections to suggest that the television show’s claims to historicity may be unwittingly contributing to this type of misappropriation of the medieval to shore up modern myths about the history of race.

SPLIT STREAMS

Saturday, March 31, 2018

Humanities A66

Against Intelligibility: Sontag, Artaud, and the Politics of Antihumanist Performance

Hana Worthen, Barnard College

Performance and theatricality - a shifting paradigm ?

Marielle Pelissero, Université Paris 10 - Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense

Performing Populism, or Why We Can't Separate Violence from the Stage

Rachael Allison Lee, Harvard University

Cantonese Pop Songs as the Post-colonial Avant-Pop

Lorraine Wong, University of Otago

The Artist Is President: Edgelords and the Liminal-Norm, from Abramovic to Trump

Christopher Grobe, Amherst College

Trump as American Myth

Anthony Manganaro, University of Washington Seattle

Post-truth: Vladislav Surkov's Non-Linear War and Vladimir Putin's Popularity

Alisa Zhulina, New York University (NYU)

SEMINAR: PROSTHETIC IMMORTALITIES: POETRY, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE LOGIC OF SURVIVAL

Adam Rosenthal, Texas A&M University

Friday, March 30, 2018

Bunche 3123

Immortality of the Inhuman

Peter Paik, Yonsei University

Extinction and Evolutionary Survivance

Luke Donahue, Independent Scholar

Saturday, March 31, 2018

Bunche 3143

Sur-vivance

Kas Saghafi, University of Memphis

Poetic Prosthetics and the Survival of Immortality

Adam Rosenthal, Texas A&M University

'I engraft you new' - The Prosthetic Lyric of Shakespeare's Sonnets

Eileen Sperry, The College of Saint Rose

Prosthetic Mortality: Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain and the Question of biopolitics before Life

Armando Mastrogiovanni, The Cooper Union

Hölderlin: Poetics under Pressure

Michael Berlin, University of California Irvine (UC Irvine)

SEMINAR: TATTOOS AS/IN LITERATURE: BEYOND THE SEMIOTIC AND THE BODILY

James Martell, Lyon College

Erik Larsen, University of Rochester

Friday, March 30, 2018

Humanities A51

Tattooed Vikings, Racial Nostalgia, and the Imaginary Middle Ages

Arwen Taylor, Arkansas Tech University

Tattooing Medievalism: marking the Middle Ages in critical and bodily discourse

Anna Siebach-Larsen, University of Rochester

Summary of findings, outcomes, or experiences

The conversation that flourished across the two days of this seminar was engaged particularly with a deconstructive approach to tattoos, considering the tattoo as an unstable text within a textual fiction. Participants were interested in the utility of tattooing as an expression of identity—for characters, as well as for their creators and critics—suspended on the skin, at the border of the self and the world. We discussed how the problem of intention and interpretation, well known as an element of literary criticism, apply as well to tattoos, which often encode highly personal meanings legible primarily to their bearers, but at a site that is relentlessly available for divergent interpretations governed by the onlooker's beliefs and assumptions. The seminar considered the degree to which tattooing has been an act of resistance or rebellion, a way of marking oneself in opposition to mainstream culture and values, and the degree to which it has become a commodity marking one's access to body-modification resources, a risky aestheticization of the skin.

All of these approaches have consequences for my work thinking about far-right uses of the medieval relative to identity, identity categories, and the ways one regards one's own body relative to others'. These ideas have been enormously useful as I continue revising the work for publication (see below), adding a more nuanced theoretical perspective to how I discuss the act of tattooing itself. Meanwhile, my own interests in history and ethics allowed me to bring a longer historical perspective, and a focus on the use of tattoos to mark social boundaries for inclusion and exclusion, to the conversation. My paper was well received, and the intersection of my interests in tattooing with others' was valuable for my work as well as theirs.

Conclusions and recommendations

I am currently revising this paper for submission to *Estudios del discurso*, an international multilingual journal of theory and criticism published at Morelos State University. (See <http://esdi.uaem.mx/index.php/estudiosdeldiscurso/index>.) The initial draft will be submitted by October 15 for publication, if all goes as planned, in Volume 5 no. 1 (2019).