



Re: Spring 2019 Sabbatical Report

Name: Kim Hester Williams

School: Arts and Humanities

Department: English/American Multicultural Studies

Date of Sabbatical Leave - Semester: Spring **Year:** 2019

Date by which Sabbatical Leave Report is Due:

August 20, 2019 (within one academic year from completion of leave, usually the first day of subsequent semester).

Book Manuscript:

Revised and refined concept for book project on Whiteness and Black Apotheosis; interviewed human subjects; traveled to key locations for interviews, photographs, and other documentation for the book.

The main activity that I devoted my sabbatical leave to was revising and refining the concept of my single-author book manuscript. I was able to reconsider the framing and purpose as well as the approach for this project. The original manuscript title was “Minstrel Acts: Black Pain and White Redemption in the Liberal Imagination.” This is a project that I have been working on for many years but the topic had been constantly shifting in its scope. I needed to find ways to cohere my ideas and land on a decided, dedicated focus for the project. Was I really talking about racial minstrelsy? Was I discussing the concept of minstrelsy historically, culturally, politically or otherwise? How does the concept of minstrelsy fit within my larger discussion of racial identity and redemption? How am I discussing the concept of redemption in the context of racial relations? Is that an effective way to analyze and discuss racism and, specifically, the visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility of Black subjects and antiblackness? In addition, how and why am I discussing whiteness? Most importantly, I had to review and decide on the objects of analysis. Am I analyzing the same texts, literature, films, and other written and visual rhetoric that I identified a decade ago? Is this a largely text-based project or should I incorporate additional sites of analysis? That is, should I consider including interviews? I spent a significant amount of my time considering these questions and exploring various approaches to revising and, again, refining the project. All of my thinking and detailed, written documentation throughout the spring 2019 semester and most of the summer of 2019 was only made possible by having a sabbatical leave which allowed me to spend large amounts of dedicated time on this topic and project. In short, I was able to devote extensive time to reimagining and re-envisioning this work.

As a result, I have completely revamped this book manuscript which is now focused on racial representation in literature, film, and culture, but more specifically on representations of whiteness spanning from the nineteenth century to the present contemporary era. The revised book project, now tentatively titled, “Radical Eco/Re/Lations: Mapping Whiteness as Terror and Afro-Eco-Poetic(s) Futurity” [note: I still refer to the book, generally speaking and in shorthand, as ‘Minstrel Acts’] mainly focuses on literature by white authors who have documented whiteness as trauma. I trace how whiteness is unveiled as a particular kind of gothic horror story or perhaps, a science fiction text, that repeatedly demonstrates whiteness as simultaneously fictitious and as imaginative and material racial trauma and terror. The proliferation of American fiction and socio-cultural texts, and contexts, that attend to the horror of whiteness is stunning. It is also, in and of itself, evidence of the terror that abounds and propels its traumatic effects. In direct relation to the central focus of this book—the documentation of racial whiteness as terror—I discuss, in tandem, how racial terror is also and always met by an alternate racial imaginary, namely, Black resilience and freedom or what I identify as Afro-Eco-Futurity.

I spent my sabbatical leave researching and documenting how white writers have struggled to articulate and represent “whiteness in crisis,” for instance, abolitionist and American romantic writers like Angelina Grimke, Henry David Thoreau, Lydia M. Child, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Herman Melville. These authors and their modern counterparts (e.g. Joyce Carol Oates and Stephen King) reveal the ruptures,

absences, and discontents of whiteness as a space of, at best, ambiguity, and worse spiritual and physical torment. An excerpt from the book proposal I drafted during the sabbatical articulates my thesis and description of the revised project: I explore the ways in which [the aforementioned writers] as well as contemporary imaginative representations of “whiteness in crisis” reveal whiteness as racial trauma and terror but also presage possibilities for a new paradigm of connection and belonging. In addition, and relatedly, I trace the literary and visual representations of the Black subject and the larger project of an Afro-eco-ethics forged by a Black radicalism that serves as a transgressive humanism in defiance against Black death and racial violence. Black survival has historically been contingent on the agility--and proficiency--of Black people’s radical imagination and their reimagining of ecological relations [e.g. Octavia Butler]. Specifically, Black writers have effectively used their discursive creativity to craft modes of survival that disrupt the settler colonial, hegemonic, racial heteronormative and patriarchal relations that coalesce in universalized notions of the (raced, gendered, colonial) human and their positive relations to environment.

My research involved not only documenting white writers documenting whiteness as racial trauma and terror. I also began working through and journaling about how to bridge this aspect of the book with identifying distinctive instances of Black writers and artists’ dissident and correspondent Black Radical “Afro-Eco-Poetics,” a term I began to further develop during my sabbatical. I spent a great deal of time documenting instances of this representation of various Black writers’ (in both creative and theoretical texts) rigorous attention to and revolt against dominant discourses of universality and the attendant terrors of whiteness, discourses of racial hegemony, and systemic racial oppression. Furthermore, I continued my research and reading of archival, first and secondary texts that analyze the concept of race and whiteness. To better manage this information, I created an expansive annotated, working bibliography of these works and others that I am consulting for the book project.

In conjunction with my narrative work, I decided to include qualitative interviews. I was able to arrange and conduct four (4) interviews with white subjects. I decided that I would interview only white subjects for the book project. I formulated a set of questions but I ended up having a more generalized conversation about my book and what they thought about the concept of whiteness as well as how and why they identify or don’t identify as white. One of the subjects central to the book project and someone I plan to interview (hopefully) is Rachel Dolezal. While I conducted a significant amount of time researching the life and controversy surrounding Rachel Dolezal, she was not one of the subjects I was able to interview during the sabbatical. I did contact and visit the IRB office to understand the protocol and paperwork needed to do human subject research, which is something I have never included in my research but which is necessary now that I am working with human subjects for the ‘Minstrel Acts’ book project.

Additional Scholarly Activities during Spring 2019 Sabbatical:

- I met with two prospective editors (Emerald Publishing and Bloomsbury Press) to discuss a new, separate book project on Octavia Butler and Will Smith. I began drafting a book proposal in response to these meeting. I also attended and presented at the Association for the study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) Conference themed, ‘Paradise on Fire,’ that was held at UC Davis in June 2019. I presented a paper titled, “The Afro-Poetics of Disaster in Octavia Butler’s Ecologies of Care and Communalism” as a panelist for a new format the conference organizers created called, “jam sessions.” The jam session I participated in was organized under the theme of ‘Plant Thinking.’ I also presented a position paper for a “California Racial Ecologies” seminar at this ASLE conference. The seminar featured several key readings, including the 2018 *Racial Ecologies* book that I co-edited with LeiLani Nishime. Because of this, I was asked to present both my individual position paper as well as discuss with participants how the book *Racial Ecologies* was conceived, the organizing logic and principles that ground the collection, as well as speak to what I believe is the current state of ethnic and critical race studies within the field of environmental studies and ecocriticism.
- I finished writing and revising an essay for a roundtable edition of the journal *Safundi* on the 30th anniversary of Spike Lee’s 1989 film, *Do the Right Thing*. The paper I submitted for the roundtable discussion, is entitled “Mother Sister’s cry: Spike Lee’s “Speech Sounds” in the Anthropocene age of Black Lives Matter.”
- **(New) ECOHORROR WORK.** I began exploring and writing in the field of ecohorror. I have done work in this field throughout my scholarly career. However, I did not realize before my sabbatical

and recent connection with ASLE that this was a named and dedicated field of scholarship. Fortunately, other scholars know about my work in this field and I was invited to submit a chapter on Stephen King's *IT* narrative for a special edited collection of essays on the scary clown genre for McFarland press. The book collection is titled, *The Many Lives of Twisty, Pennywise, Killer Klowns, & More: Essays on the Clown Horror Genre*." I completed and submitted my individual chapter, "Out of the White (Terror) and into the Black (Presence): Difference as Monstrous in Stephen King's *IT*" at the beginning of August 2019. The collection is currently under review. Additionally, I began a third solicited academic essay on Jordan Peele's racial ecologies and ecohorror, specifically in the films *Get Out* and *Us*.

Academic Related Travel:

I made two important academic trips during my sabbatical. First, in April 2019, I traveled to New Orleans. During this trip I visited several sites that marked the history of U.S. slavery. The most important and impactful of these sites was my trip to, and tour of, the Destrehan Plantation. What I discovered is that this plantation is prominently figured in the 1811 New Orleans Slave Revolt, the largest slave revolt in U.S. history. I attended and took notes on this part of the plantation history which I have been teaching in my AMCS 260 class on 'The Poetics of Disaster' since spring 2016. I have often referred to this profound historical event in my early American literature courses, primarily by using the book, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt* by Daniel Rasmussen. I must report that my first-hand witnessing of the site of this particular slave rebellion gave new meaning and force to Rasmussen's book which I have taught and discussed with my students innumerable times. In addition to the many photographs that I took, and other archival material that I purchased, at one moment during my visit, I decided to begin video recording the grounds and exhibits. I also decided to narrate the video which I am now able to use and share in future SSU classes. Additionally, I took a trip to visit the National African American museum in Washington DC. I also took many photographs of the exhibits—as was allowed—and documented the archives and artifacts, as I did at the Destrehan plantation. Finally, and most significant to my work and the 'Minstrel Acts' book project, I traveled to the John Brown Harper's Ferry site and museum in West Virginia. This was the most impactful trip that I took because it allowed me to immerse myself in the ethos of my 'Minstrel Acts' book project which prominently focuses on and features the life and work of white abolitionists like John Brown. I do not have the space in this report to express all that I discovered and documented during this trip. However, besides the time spent re-envisioning the project, these trips were, without a doubt, one of the highlights of the sabbatical work. My scholarly work and my teaching of this history will be undoubtedly enhanced by these visits.

Invited Talk:

In March 2019, I lectured for the Santa Rosa Junior College (SRJC) W.O.L.M. (Work of Literary Merit) series dedicated to the study of Octavia Butler's 1979 novel. My lecture was titled, "Beta Days and Gamma People: Afro-Eco-Poetics, New Worldmaking, and Womanist Speech Sounds in Octavia Butler's Post-Apocalyptic Imagination." I was invited to lecture for one hour. I developed a 39 PPT slide presentation and did, indeed, speak for one-hour. However, I decided to veer from the slides and discuss the 'Minstrel Acts' book project and, in particular, I focused on the white male character Rufus in *Kindred*. I decided to give a rigorous description of his function in the novel as a young boy who is socialized to become a slaveholder and the central struggle of Dana, the Black female protagonist, to preserve his innocence but also to survive the racial violence that he learns to perpetuate onto her and the other Black characters and that is, in fact, perpetuated on him as the terror of whiteness. After the lecture, I answered questions from audience members. I documented a surprising and powerful reaction from that experience and exchange. Specifically, the deep (and surprising) emotion expressed by two white male students after my talk, which they both shared with me, is featured prominently in the 'Minstrel Acts' book manuscript.

Concluding Statement:

I am grateful for the opportunity I was afforded to revisit and enliven my research, and especially the 'Minstrel Acts' monograph. As well, I was able to spend some time augmenting my teaching resources through my travel and documentation of antebellum sites of resistance and commemoration of the struggle against U.S. chattel slavery. Finally, I made an affiliate academic connection with SRJC faculty (two of whom are a former SSU students) and their students which allowed me to not only represent SSU in the larger Sonoma County community; it corresponded with and helped to solidify my book project research and re-envisioning. Thank you for this sabbatical and opportunity to allow my scholarship to evolve. I am confident that SSU at large and particularly my students will benefit from my sabbatical activities.