

Fall 2019 Sabbatical Report

Mercy Romero Associate Professor American Literature & American Studies
Hutchins School of Liberal Studies Sonoma State University

I used my semester long sabbatical leave to address reader's reports and submit my book *Toward Camden* for publication (forthcoming, Duke University Press). I also made progress on my second book project, including two scholarly presentations of new research, and the research and development of a new Writing Intensive Course (WIC).

The primary goal of my sabbatical was to complete my first book. I made the recommended revisions and composed a prologue for *Toward Camden*. Afterward and in new writing, I was able to spend some time thinking about the histories of slavery in Camden, a subject I could only touch upon in the book. In *Toward Camden* I wrote about Puerto Rican memory and the site specificity of vacancy and organized abandonment, that is, what it meant to live around so many empty lots and vacant houses, how they functioned as a kind of commons, and how memory and movements might work at these spaces and vacancies to build relation. In my return trips to Camden, I began to think about the histories of the Delaware River waters that also bordered our neighborhood, and what another assembly at these histories might look like and mean for the young African American and Afro/Puerto Rican people coming up in Camden, New Jersey today, a city whose large youth population is often imagined as part of its delinquency. In 2017 the first of three markers was installed along Camden, New Jersey's waterfront. These markers were imagined as the first public monuments in the state to reckon with its 18th Century slave past. After visiting two of the markers, I wrote a paper entitled: "'There are no paths in water. No signposts': Camden's Waterfront Memorials" to think about the publicity and public reckoning with the archives of slavery and present day Black life in Camden, as it intersects with a monumentalized and memorialized landscape. In October, I presented this writing at "Black Portraiture(s) V: Memory and the Archive. Past/Present/Future" at New York University. Writing this paper was very meaningful to me as it enabled me to think critically about and reflect upon my first book and the questions that emerged and stayed with me after writing the book. I am planning on revising and submitting this writing to a scholarly journal for publication (*Small Axe* or *Centro*).

During my sabbatical I also began more extensive research on Puerto Rican poet and writer Julia de Burgos' English language poems and Spanish language letters and diaries. I spent time locating, reading, and working through these documents and researching and writing about Goldwater Memorial Hospital on Roosevelt Island, where in 1953 De Burgos composed her English language poems. I am interested in expressive archives of care work, from diaries, letters, and notebooks, to how illness and grief are restaged in music and fiction. Care work is a practice taken up by Julia De Burgos and African American artists like Alberta Hunter, Gayl Jones and James Baldwin, as a remedy and intervention to intimate experiences of racialized state violence and population level vulnerability and social suffering.¹ In my new book project, I

¹ Recent scholarship by and about women of color on state violence, early death, and care work includes *The Chicana M(other)work Anthology*, University of Arizona Press, 2019; *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, PM Press, 2016.

am interested in understanding the continuities at work across these artists' careers. A study of continuities complicates how illness has hitherto been understood as representative of an ambivalence or a break - radical, isolating, or pathologized, in each of these artists' oeuvre. As interdisciplinary research that moves between African American and Latinx studies, this project contributes to the medical humanities and a site specific understanding of Black and Latinx literary and expressive arts. I presented my research on Julia De Burgos at "Build As We Fight," the 2019 American Studies Association conference in Hawaii and "Being Human," the 2020 Modern Language Association convention in Seattle.

I also researched, prepared, and submitted an application for a short term library grant at the New York Public Library, to study the Schomburg's Alberta Hunter Papers (1919-1986), which contain personal and professional documents, letters, notebooks, and examinations related to African American blues singer Alberta Hunter's career as a practical nurse. Alberta Hunter's long term presence at Goldwater Memorial Hospital as a scrub nurse and her archives, which include letters to other artists and friends, and perhaps the few musical compositions crafted during her tenure as a nurse, may enable a richer understanding and view of such continuities, intersecting medical, literary, and Black performance histories. This research will also form a significant bridge in my understanding of Julia De Burgos' time at Goldwater Memorial Hospital as a patient and Hunter's role there a few years later as a nurse.

I read and revisited more of James Baldwin's works and I began a preliminary study of the NYPL Schomburg's Baldwin archive. I plan to visit this archive as I write my second book, focusing on Baldwin's travel and the writings he completed while in Puerto Rico. To extend my study of Baldwin to my teaching at Sonoma State, I developed a new Writing Intensive Course (WIC) that I will teach in the Spring 2020 "James Baldwin." I designed this course to introduce and deepen our students' studies of a significant public intellectual and African American writer. Teaching Baldwin will allow me to teach writing and genre innovation with and through his deeply relevant work as a novelist, essayist, and playwright. I am working with Baldwin's archive in my second book project and a deeper study of his novels, short stories, essays, and plays with our students is also part of how I balance being a teacher-scholar.

These professional accomplishments are the direct result of my sabbatical leave. The gift of time and the fall salary and travel funding enabled me to finish, explore, and grow new writings, share my work at academic conferences, and develop a wonderful new course. I am so very grateful for the sabbatical, the support of the university, and the generosity of my colleagues.