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Elizabeth Chang/ UMSAEP Report

Attn: Prof. Rodney Uphoff

My visit to the University of Western Cape Department of English, hosted by Prof. Courtney Davids, took place from June 1 to June 24. It was a very productive visit in which I conducted archival research, completed a book manuscript, met informally with members of the UWC English department, and shared my research with the department. I will briefly review each of these aspects before describing future plans and outcomes from the exchange. Overall, it was very successful; I very much appreciate the opportunity to expand my research and teaching internationally. Thank you so much to the UMSAEP program and Prof. Uphoff in particular!

Research: I was able to complete a substantial amount of original archival research while in Cape Town. While the archives at the UWC did not hold any material relevant to my subject – 19C British settler traveler narratives and botanical writings – I was able to gain entry to the National Library Special Collections and make good use of their collections. The materials from the later nineteenth-century describing the (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to convert the Company Gardens into a more substantial botanical study site were particularly helpful. With the use of these materials, as well as other letters and documents dating from the late 1700s onward, I was able to add necessary material and research to my current book project (described below). Given that almost all materials relevant to a researcher of the nineteenth-century were located downtown, it would make sense to consider a possible shift in housing location so as not to incur such a long commute from the UWC-adjacent guest house if research is the primary goal.

I was also able to travel to Grahamstown (via an overnight bus ride) to visit the National Museum of English Literature. That archive had strong holdings in 19C travel narratives by British visitors and settlers, some of which are very rare and difficult to access in print in the United States. I benefited from the winter break there and had the reading room for my exclusive use. In both libraries the research librarians were extremely helpful with making suggestions for possible sources and future areas of study. Using the travel narratives I studied at NELM, I began to lay the groundwork for the argument for my next book, which will investigate the literary form of travel writing from the nineteenth-century British imperial frontier. I also gathered material for some articles on topics particularly relevant to traveling in Cape Colony that I hope to publish in the next year.

Writing: I came to UWC with very partial materials of my book project “Novel Cultivations,” which investigates currents of plant exchange and collection as described in novels in nineteenth-century Britain. By the time my visit was concluded, I had completed a full first draft and incorporated much new material relating to the Cape Colony that gave important supplement to my previously existing work on Hong Kong and Western China. The completion of this draft was a key step on my path to promotion to full professor and the resources and conversations I had during my visit were an important aid in its conclusion.

Informal Exchange: Unfortunately, due to my schedule, I was not able to be present at UWC during the term time. This meant I could not observe any regularly scheduled classes. I did attend a conference presented by honors students (the equivalent of first-year MAs in our system) outlining their research project, which was a very interesting introduction to the similarities and differences between our two educational systems. Still, I would very much like a chance to

interact further with undergraduates in the department and learn more about the kinds of courses offered. I also had the opportunity to chat informally with other department faculty about other possible areas of exchange between the MU and UWC English departments. It would be productive to identify other areas in which there is overlap between the two faculty in order to promote more collaboration. It seemed that graphic novels and Caribbean literature might be two other possible starting points.

Formal Presentation: I presented to the department a talk entitled “Exchanging Natures: Plants, Novels, and Nations in 19C Britain.” Here, too, some small scheduling difficulties occurred. A large winter storm closed campus on the day I was assigned to present my own research necessitating that my talk be rescheduled to a time much less convenient for most faculty. Despite this, many were able to attend my talk and I enjoyed a lively conversation about my book project with faculty and other graduate students. These suggestions will be incorporated into my revision and will greatly benefit my finished product.

Future Plans: Prof. Davids and I had a chance to discuss some future projects and look forward to collaborating further. Given the success of her participation in my Victorian Women Writers class during her visit to MU, I would very much like to try designing and implementing further joint teaching possibilities. The MU students benefited very much from her perspective and expertise, and I believe they would also gain a tremendous amount by studying with UWC undergraduate peers. Skype and other communication tools might be productively used to create cross-cultural classroom links for this purpose. One way to test out a version of this collaboration might be to work through the Honors College Tutorials. I plan to consult with ET@MO and the Honors College to see if any other ideas / strategies might exist for doing this kind of course development.

On the research side, Prof. Davids and I also made plans to continue forward with a jointly edited collection focusing on Victorian women travelers throughout the British empire and beyond. We have tentatively decided to anchor this collection in the female traveler’s interactions with native guides, domestics, and other servants as a way to explore issues of race, gender, class, and narrative. The next step in this project will be to draft a call for papers and begin to solicit possible contributors before identifying a publisher for the project.

Conclusion: Overall the project, while not proceeding exactly according to all predetermined plans, was a great success. I am very excited to encourage other members of the English Department to participate and I look forward to future opportunities to engage with the UWC English Department both long-distance and in-person. Thank you again for providing me with this opportunity to learn more about the UWC campus and to host a visitor here at MU.