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In this issue

- Chair’s Message
- Conference Spotlight: 2019 GSC Conference Reports
- Series on Teaching and Mentoring: But That’s Another Story - Experiences in Teaching and Learning “Difference”
- Upcoming Funding Opportunities
- Invitation from the Editor

Quick Links

- About GSC
- GSC Twitter
- GSC Facebook
- GSC Email
- GSC Mentoring Program Brochure (PDF)

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- Natalie Whitaker (2020), Newsletter Editor
  Saint Louis University
- Austin Powell (2020), Mentorship Programs
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Chair’s Message
Greetings, fellow medievalist grad students! We at the GSC wish you a peaceful end to the semester.

After all the exams and papers are done, be sure to take a look at the many funding opportunities for research and professional service outlined in this issue.

As we look ahead to 2020, we hope you will consider submitting something for the GSC newsletter. We want to showcase the graduate student experience here and welcome submissions for every edition of the newsletter.

Finally, we want you on the GSC! We are accepting applications for three two-year positions. In addition to creating this newsletter, we also organize mentoring exchanges, publicize funding opportunities and CFPs on social media, and organize graduate student themed panels at Kalamazoo, Leeds, and the Annual Meeting. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions. Don’t miss the January 15th deadline!

Sincerely,

Jillian Bjerke
Chair, Graduate Student Committee

Conference Spotlight: 2019 GSC Conference Reports

Medieval Academy of America Annual Meeting 2019
University of Pennsylvania

For the MAA Annual Meeting, the GSC organized a roundtable, entitled, “Handling Issues of Inclusivity and Respect in the Medieval Studies Classroom as an Ally: Classes We Teach, Classes We Take.” The roundtable fostered passionate discussion about ways to create more inclusive classrooms. The speakers presented a wide range of challenges they have confronted and creative solutions coming from their own diverse backgrounds and experiences. It was informally paired with the Inclusivity and Diversity Committee’s panel “Medievalists of Color (MoC) Graduate Students and Race: Classes We Teach, Classes We Take.” In addition, the GSC hosted a casual evening get-together at the City Tap House, a popular UPenn hangout, which offered the opportunity to extend conversation.

International Congress on Medieval Studies 2019
Western Michigan University

For the International Congress on Medieval Studies, the GSC organized a roundtable, entitled "Stepping into the Professions: Tips on Navigating a Variety of Career Paths for Medievalist Graduate Students and Early Career Scholars (ECSs)." The roundtable was co-sponsored by the GSC and the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. The speakers discussed the
variety of professional positions available to medievalists and the best strategies for pursuing them. The roundtable provided a venue to discuss the challenges faced by medievalists once they have completed their graduate studies and may be left, so to speak, without a safety net. The reception following the roundtable afforded a vibrant and more relaxed setting to further expand on the discussions.

**International Medieval Congress 2019**  
**University of Leeds**

For the International Medieval Congress, the GSC organized a roundtable entitled “How to Sell Your Post-Graduate Degree in Medieval Studies Outside the Tenure-Track Job Market.” The speakers offered practical advice about finding alternative job opportunities beyond tenure-track teaching positions. They also offered reassurance about the wide-ranging value of the skills medievalists gain in graduate school. In addition, the GSC hosted a reception at the Old Pub at the University of Leeds. The event happily coincided with the final match of the Women’s World Cup in soccer, which led to a lively evening.

And a heads-up! Registration for the 2020 Annual Meeting, to be held at the University of California, Berkeley from 26-28 March is now open. Registration and further information can be found on the Medieval Academy website at [https://www.medievalacademy.org/events/EventDetails.aspx?id=1125497](https://www.medievalacademy.org/events/EventDetails.aspx?id=1125497)

Also, consider applying for a graduate student travel bursary! More information can be found on the Medieval Academy website at [https://www.medievalacademy.org/page/GradStudentBursaries](https://www.medievalacademy.org/page/GradStudentBursaries).

**Series on Teaching and Mentoring**

For the following few issues, the GSC Newsletter will feature a series on teaching the Middle Ages and mentoring students, drawn from the varied perspectives of medievalists at different points in their academic careers and in different fields. We hope these stories will offer insights into how we can create more inclusive classrooms, thoughtfully foster student development, and effectively inspire interest in the fascinatingly complex and wonderfully surprising medieval world. Enjoy reading the first installment.

**But That’s Another Story: Experiences in Teaching and Learning “Difference”**  
By Rachael Vause

“All sculptures look the same. I can’t tell the difference!” complained a student in my section of Art History Survey I. I gave him an ironic side-eye as we stood at the chalkboard after class. “Sure, you can,” I assured him. Grabbing the chalk, I drew the columnar leg of an Egyptian
figure sculpture, defining the sharp line of the exaggerated shin bone. Next to it I drew the leg of the famous Laocoön, curving muscles bulging as it twisted in space. “You’re telling me you can’t tell the difference between these two?” The student smirked and exclaimed, “Well now I can!” By the end of the semester the student had risen from a disinterested high C to an engaged A. He was able to see and appreciate difference.

While not always hard to see, differences are often difficult to appreciate. Fostering a critical approach to difference has guided my approach to pedagogy and course creation. By exploring the stories we tell ourselves, I call into question what has become “canon.” In my Early Medieval Art course, I begin with conceptions and misconceptions by asking what the term “medieval” or “Middle Ages” brings to mind. Tales of modern fantasy or the brutal depictions of fiction or cinema foster a popular canon of a legendary or a dark age. Questioning the historiography of these conceptions is the first step of revealing why we’ve told ourselves these stories. The next step is understanding that although “the past is a different country,” it was one populated by humans who inhabited similar bodies and brains. My final paper assignment is designed to give students a chance to inhabit the bodies of people in the Late Antique/Early Medieval periods. Rather than a traditional paper on art historical analysis, students are tasked to create a work of historical fiction. They can choose to be a late Roman soldier, a patriarch during Iconoclasm, a Muslim pilgrim, a monk or nun in the British Isles, or a courtier at Charlemagne’s court. This thought experiment allows students to explore the biases, considerations, fears, and joys inspired by an artwork situated in a particular historical moment – with surprising results.

As instructors, we are not immune to the stories we are told, or sometimes tell ourselves. The story of a student and parent was presented to me before my medieval course had even begun. I soon came to realize that everyone involved had their own version of the situation: the parent was convinced of a learning disability that their child could not manage; Student Disability Services was convinced the parent was problematically over-involved; the student, I found, was self-sufficient, highly intelligent, and tremendously creative. For the final assignment the student researched the ways in which secondary school teachers use the arts to help children cope with episodes of mass violence (such as shootings). My pupil imagined the nuns of eighth-century Ireland, helping the children of their villages cope with the violence of Viking raids; it was the most innovative paper I have ever had the pleasure to read.

Presently, the issue of racial difference is at the forefront of debate in early medievalist circles. In the upcoming semester I will be revisiting a course on Visual Culture which I designed with such debates in mind. The course encompasses not only the early Middle Ages, but the entirety of art history in one semester. To manage the breadth of this material, I selected a theme, a tool to question the canon. To challenge students’ assumptions about what is “primitive” versus “sophisticated,” what is “better” or “worse,” what is “wrong” or “right,” I chose the theme of “difference.” From the Romans to the present, we explore attitudes toward vision, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and art and visual media. In the first class meeting I endeavor to establish a respectful environment wherein we can dissect and discuss these issues. I use humor, breakout groups, and games to create comradery and diffuse tension. One
popular group activity is based on the (now defunct) Bubble Project. Students are given a selection of magazine ads and paper speech bubbles. After selecting an ad, the groups are asked to consider its purpose, the assumptions it makes, and the possible consequences. Students then brainstorm several bubble responses that concisely but powerfully call attention to the problematic nature of the ad. My students’ responses have been creative, thoughtful, and often sardonic.

The term “difference” has become so loaded as to read as negative. My goal as an educator has been to communicate the value of sensitivity to differences. Whether we choose to embrace certain differences, engaging curiosity, empathy, and respect opens us to new ways of seeing and thinking. I will end this article as I end my first class, with Chimamanda Adichie’s TED Talk, *The Danger of the Single Story*. In it, Adichie says, “The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.” By recognizing the value of both our similarities and our differences, the medieval period emerges from the shadows a much brighter place than imagined, full of the exchange of ideas and artistic experiments. Perhaps the past is not “a different country” after all, but rather, just another story.

*Rachael Vause is a PhD Candidate at the University of Delaware and current Chair of the Undergraduate Mentoring Program. Her dissertation, “The Cross and the Body in Early Medieval England,” utilizes material culture theory and neuroscientific research to explore how wearable power objects like the cross can change cultural notions about the mind/body relationship, specifically in religious conversion.*

**Upcoming Funding Opportunities**

Are you looking for funding for your research? Consider funding opportunities for graduate students from the Medieval Academy! There are upcoming deadlines for the following opportunities:

- John Leyerle-CARA Prize for Dissertation Research (deadline January 31)
- Medieval Academy Dissertation Grants (deadline February 15)
- MAA/GSC Grant for Innovation in Community Building and Professionalization (deadline February 15)
- CARA Tuition Scholarships (deadline March 15)

Details about each opportunity and further information about applying can be found on the Medieval Academy website ([https://www.medievalacademy.org/](https://www.medievalacademy.org/)).

**An Invitation from the Editors**

In response to the diverse needs and interests of graduate students in Medieval Studies, the GSC plans to continue expanding the variety of content offered in the newsletter. We hope to
feature more narratives spotlighting the diverse experiences in which graduate students participate in their higher-ed journeys (conferences, events, workshops, travels, organizations, etc...) and when beginning their forays into the job market, whether on traditional routes, in alternative academic positions, or compatible careers.

If you have an interest in sharing your experiences and ideas as a graduate student or early career scholar, please send queries and contributions to GSC Newsletter senior editor Natalie Whitaker (natalie.whitaker@slu.edu) or junior editor Christine Bachman (cbachman@udel.edu).

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Get the latest news and information from the GSC on Facebook (facebook.com/GSCMAA) and Twitter (@GSC_MAA).