Report on results of Scholarly Activity Improvement Fund Grant 2011-2012

I applied for a SAIF grant in Spring of 2011 in order to draft a book proposal synthesizing the past three years of my research on nineteenth-century American literature. The book argues that sea and travel narratives are especially important genres for studying the dynamics of commerce, nationalism and racial conflict during the decades leading up to the Civil War. American economic power and its continued reliance on slavery were highlighted in works where the characters traveled abroad because the authors were especially concerned with how the United States was perceived by other nations with whom it was competing in global networks of trade. Many novels concerned with sea trade and travel dealt with issues of transporting slaves, trading in the products of slavery between the U.S. and Europe, or expanding American commerce into areas that made contact with different populations unavoidable (Central America, the south Pacific, or Africa). In my examination of the sea novels of Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and James Fenimore Cooper, as well as overseas travel themes in texts by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Jamaican writer Mary Seacole, I argue that nineteenth-century American writers were deeply conflicted over the relationships between free trade, a free democracy, and the profound racial inequality at the heart of American political debates.

The research and writing I was able to conduct over the summer months of 2011 took my project in some exciting new directions. My most significant achievement over the course of this last academic year has changed the direction and depth of my scholarship (and thus my book proposal) substantially. In January of 2012, I used portions of my book proposal draft to apply for a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar entitled “The American
Maritime Peoples” in to be conducted through the Munson Institute at Mystic Seaport Museum in Mystic, CT. I was accepted to this intensive five week program, where I heard lectures from current experts in the fields of Maritime history and culture, as well as conducted primary source research in the museum’s extensive archives. The work I did during this seminar profoundly enhanced my historical knowledge of the period I study, and provided me with additional literary texts to include in my overall project. The seminar, which approached issues of American culture and the sea through the work of historians, literary scholars, cultural geographers and biologists, has provided my scholarship with a truly interdisciplinary foundation, and the next stage of my project will be to synthesize this new material into the structure of the book.

The time afforded to me by the grant also resulted in two public presentations of my scholarship. In December of 2011, I presented a revised version of my work on James Fenimore Cooper as a speaker in the LAE Faculty Forum Series. The talk was entitled “The Other Pirates of the Caribbean: James Fenimore Cooper’s Sea Novels and the Making of America.” I also submitted an abstract of a revised version of one of my book chapters to this year’s Pacific and Ancient Modern Language Association annual conference. The paper analyzes Jamaican writer Mary Seacole’s depictions of American businesses in Panama in the decade just before the Panama Canal was constructed. That paper is entitled “Migration and Movement: The United State and Panama in The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands,” and will be presented in October 2012 in Seattle, WA.