

International Graduate Student Seminar: Plenary Session July 30, 2007

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Originally, we planned to start this afternoon session with our three guest professors' summary of their keynote speech, and then proceed with Q&A sessions. While it was a viable option, there was a slight concern that there might be a little too much overlap between the discussions already held on Friday, July 28 and what we were going to do in the session this Monday afternoon, if we decided to stay with our original plans.

After giving some thoughts, we decided to execute our contingency plan. We asked three professors to talk about their "*backstage episodes*" or "*the making*" of their research. We believed that this would be a very rare opportunity for graduate students to listen to professors talk about how they "do research" in their respective field. We asked the professors to touch upon things such as following. (1) Manufacturing of ideas, or the process through which they came up with their ideas: How did they find their current research questions? How did they sort their ideas, and refine their main arguments? (2) Whether their current research interests had any relevance to their dissertation research: How are their experiences in dissertation research helping them today as a scholar? (3) Future directions: Where is their research headed? What issues are they going to address in the next stage? (4) Dissemination plans: Given their research topic, how would they choose a journal or a publisher? What are the standards?

Each professor talked for 20 minutes about their research experiences; then graduate students asked questions to each professor for 15 minutes. We started with Professor Gary Laderman, who shared how he became interested in the relationship between religion and violence in America. He stressed the importance of "playfulness" in doing any kind of research, and also spoke about his experiences in writing and publishing a popular trade book. Then Professor Andrew Rotter talked about how he came up with his idea of religious typology in his research of the U.S. diplomatic history. He spoke about how his intellectual habit of jumping simultaneously around various issues and interests was relevant to his making ideas. Following Professor Rotter, Professor Hortense Spillers shared her experiences in writing her dissertation in a difficult time of the post-civil rights movement period, and how it affected her interests in Martin Luther King, Jr. To each professor, graduate student participants raised a number of fresh and intriguing questions. Some of their questions were directly related to

each professor's research, while others were more relevant to their concerns about graduate career. We also had wonderful comments and advice from Professor David Goodman of University of Melbourne and Professor Thomas Sugrue of University of Pennsylvania who actively participated in our session.

Toward the end of the session, we secured time for an informal general session so that students could ask our guest professors more wide-ranging questions. We intended to have this session particularly because it was a good opportunity for Japanese graduate students who had plans to do their dissertation research in the United States to ask for American professors' advice. Questions from students included the relationship between "playfulness" in dissertation research and risk taking in choosing a dissertation topic, the reasons behind integration in American society, and appropriateness of using e-mail to make initial contacts with an American professor.

We believe this graduate student session was very successful, and it set an important stage for the next years' international graduate student seminars. We confirmed that graduate students gain a lot not only by reading articles and writing papers, but also by participating in a session like ours that is geared more toward professional development and career planning.