LARC Proposal and Personal Statement

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I hope to work with the LARC project on a team researching our nation’s history of collective amnesia towards slavery and the culture constructed around that institution. My undergraduate focus in Women’s and Gender Studies gives me a specific lens and line of questioning through which to understand master-slave relationships in the antebellum South. In particular, I hope that an understanding of this history will further my education as I continue studying gendered, racialized, and sexual power dynamics.

I find it important to note that I have only taken one college-level English class. However, my education in the Women’s and Gender Studies department has given me many tools of analysis to bring into my research. As a Freshman, I took a colloquium titled “The North African Experience In France,” which focused on French Muslim women in immigrant communities and the racial, gendered, and religious oppression these women faced. Last year, my studies in Feminist Theory and American Ethnic Studies gave me a clearer understanding of the manipulations of power in the hands of privileged peoples in society.

Currently, I am taking American Women’s History and Masculinities. Both of these classes began by historicizing sexuality and sexual power within our society. From these classes I learned how the disadvantaged within society retain their voices; understanding agency as embodied in the oppressed helps me recognize the agency of enslaved peoples and their ability to consent.
With this research behind me, I wish to join this project focusing on issues of agency and consent in same-sex master-slave relationships. I will explore scenes from contemporary literature, including Valerie Martin’s *Property* and Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, both of which include scenes of same-sex master-slave liaisons. In these texts, I will examine same-sex attraction and eroticism and the ability to consent in these relationships. I will also use reader-response theories while studying these scenes. Why are readers hesitant approaching these scenes? How do these authors subvert our common amnesia towards queer and interracial histories? And how do these scenes blur distinctions between private and public histories?

My definition of consent stems from contemporary feminist theories, including Catherine MacKinnon’s “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State” and Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex.” The use of these feminist theories follows the caveat that the antebellum South was another society to which these theories may not fully apply. However, contemporary theories of consent may nevertheless help me understand dominance and submission in contemporary representations of these master-slave relationships.

I will still be studying abroad at the beginning of summer 2011. I have made plans with Professor Makau concerning my participation on this research team, and we decided to begin this internship via email and Skype. I will begin my research in June in France and return to Willamette University early in July. As I plan on analyzing contemporary texts, I will have access to research materials and will be capable of beginning this project while abroad for the month of June.