



On October 19–21, 2018, the Department of Religious Studies graduate students successfully hosted their fifth biennial interdisciplinary conference. This year’s theme was *Sovereignty & Strangeness*, and the program asked participants to think critically about the intersection of these intellectual currents and explore the following questions: “How might the language of sovereignty be useful for thinking about power in religious or secular contexts when spiritual communities, charismatic individuals, and state institutions make claim to and perform supreme authority over populations and territories? And how might the language of strangeness help trace the disruptive potential of places, practices, and bodies that exceed the logic of sovereignty?” The weekend brought together fifteen graduate student panelists from universities across the United States and Canada to share and discuss their interdisciplinary research, which drew on academic fields like queer studies, religious studies, black studies, history, philosophy, sociology, and literary studies to provide responses to these questions.

The conference started off with a viewing of Rungano Nyoni’s 2018 film *I Am Not a Witch* to jumpstart a conversation about the complicated relationship between law and outsider religious communities. Professor Melissa Wilcox of UC Riverside and Professor Ashon Crawley of the

University of Virginia capped Friday and Saturday nights, respectively, with keynotes that connected their own research to the conference themes and conversation. Professor Wilcox set the stage for the conference with a talk on how scholars of religion can challenge social and sexual norms by attending to queer practices of religious parody. Professor Crawley’s talk touched on the role of the Hammond B-3 Organ in Black Pentecostalism to frame a discussion on the intersections of queer aesthetics and Black life.

Graduate students presented on a wide array of topics, including papers on the politics of shame in Yemen’s revolutionary protests; P.T. Barnum’s curation of “superstitious” objects; how the environment of the swamp served as a refuge from slavery-based plantation sovereignty; and the theologies of flesh present in the literature of James Baldwin. “I really appreciated the engagement with my work and seeing how enthusiastic everyone was to discuss how we might reconceptualize sovereignty/sovereignties today and also borders,” said Claudia Garcia-Rojas, a Northwestern graduate student.



Professor Wilcox observed that “the papers were of excellent quality, and showcased the impressive work that religious studies graduate students are doing.”



After the conference, Northwestern graduate students participated in a professionalization workshop on how to turn conference papers into journal articles. Professors Crawley and Wilcox guided the conversation by sharing their experiences in and strategies for academic publishing. Students pre-circulated and responded to conference-sized research papers, asking critical questions and suggesting future directions.

The weekend provided a collaborative space for graduate students and faculty to think through some of the questions that are at the forefront both in the study of religion and in conversations throughout the humanities. The theme, *Sovereignty & Strangeness*, fostered an environment for upcoming scholars to think critically about their research beyond disciplinary boundaries. Professor Crawley was “quite impressed with the level of theoretically rich and engaging conversation the conference was able to stage,” and added that “graduate students displaying this kind of care with regard to dialogue partners was truly a pleasure to sense and joy to experience.”