

Santander Travel Award Report:

By Richard Ashby

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My research is on appropriations of *King Lear* in post-war British playwriting. I am analysing the way post-war British playwrights have appropriated *King Lear* in response to the Holocaust and the fate of the subject and tragedy 'after' Auschwitz. My thesis concentrates specifically on the figures Howard Barker, David Rudkin and Sarah Kane, all of whom have produced plays that rewrite, rework and reimagine *King Lear*. Drawing on the work of Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno, I make the case that, through appropriations of *King Lear*, Rudkin, Barker and Kane contest the 'withering' of subjectivity in the damaged world of post-Auschwitz society, producing various tragic forms of drama that prioritize the representation of the subject and subjective autonomy in times of catastrophe.

With the help of The Santander Travel Award, I was able to travel to Norfolk, Virginia in April 2016 to deliver a public presentation at an event called "Shakespeare 400 Years After", hosted by Old Dominion University to mark the 400th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare. The name "Old Dominion" reflects the status of Virginia as the first colonial "possession" established in mainland "British America", and the State retains not only a strong early-modern studies research culture, but also the ongoing material and cultural traces of its settlement in the early 1600s. The aim of the week-long, campus-wide, city-wide, multi-disciplinary event was to host a rich exploration of the varied and often contradictory meanings of a pervasive cultural icon in the material practices of contemporary cultural and social life – a preoccupation also that shapes the research I am undertaking into the "uses" to which the early-modern Shakespeare has been put in our post-Holocaust world.



“Shakespeare 400 Years After” was the first international academic and cultural event I have attended and provided a unique opportunity to meet and establish relationships with an array of international researchers working in the field of Shakespeare and contemporary appropriation. By attending the event and presenting a paper called “Catastrophic Subjects: *King Lear*, Tragedy and Subjectivity in the Drama of Howard Barker and David Rudkin”, I was able to introduce the research I am undertaking to new whole academic audience, who were – as I expected – unfamiliar with the playwrights I am studying, who are not all that well-known outside of Britain and Europe. At “Shakespeare 400 Years After” I was able to promote the work I have been undertaking, but I also had the opportunity to gain a new, “international” perspective on that work and place it in a wider research *milieu*.

Perhaps the most enduring aspect of the dialogue I had with other researchers was around the large and historic Irish community in Norfolk, descendants of Presbyterian and other Ulster Protestant Dissenters from the Ulster region who migrated to North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the playwrights I am studying – David Rudkin – is from mixed English and Irish parentage, his father being a Revivalist Northern Irish pastor – and so from the same kind of dissenting Irish protestant community that colonized Virginia. This opened a whole new perspective on the relationship between Shakespeare, the Americas, Ireland, colonialism, immigration, religion and – indeed – tragedy and catastrophe that I had not considered before, but which I hope will go in to inform both the research I am conducting now and possible future research too.

While I had some limited experience of public-speaking, I had not presented to an academic audience before travelling to Virginia. Presenting to an international audience at such a large-scale event was nothing if not a baptism of fire, but it was also a very rewarding experience and one that was hugely valuable to an early-career researcher relatively near the start of his PhD studies. I am still in contact with some of the other researchers I met in Virginia and hope to return to the state in the future. This would not have been possible were it not for the Travel Award – for which I am very grateful!