

Abstracts for Second SAA Ambivalence Seminar  
Valerie Traub and Fran Dolan  
11-1, Friday, April 12

**Patricia Badir**  
**Shakespeare, the Smelter, and the Subdivision**

Sunningdale is an unremarkable subdivision of the town of Trail, British Columbia, located in the Kootney Mountains north of the US border. The subdivision was developed in the late 1940s to provide affordable homes for returning war veterans. The vets would become company men in a company town whose economic base was a notorious lead smelter that was conscripted to the Manhattan Project and had been the subject of a precedent-setting international lawsuit over cross-border air pollution. Against this backdrop, we find Sunningdale's bungalow-lined streets named for "the wives of Shakespearean characters." These streets are correctives to romanticized perceptions of sublimely "Beautiful British Columbia" and they are reminders of how the economies of global capitalism remained intertwined with the mythologies of British imperialism well into the Twentieth Century. But these streets are also sites where we can observe BC settler- colonial identity, defined by whiteness and heroism, and also practical design, domesticity, and housing security consolidating around Shakespeare's name. Noticing this odd consolidation, may allow us to see "the complicated workings of systems of privilege and oppression" (Coccia et al, p. 4) in operation in this deeply ambivalent place, allowing us to rethink our understanding of the ways in which histories of human and environmental devastation get embedded in colonial tales – Shakespearean and otherwise – of opportunity, development, and prosperity.

**Clara Biesel**  
**“‘Print o’life;’ Ambivalence and Embodiment in London Print Cultures”**

This project considers the affective responses visible in Shakespeare's plays and a pair of contemporary texts (on anatomy and calligraphy) as individuals react to the cultural transition from texts produced primarily by hand to texts produced by machine. When read in parallel, these texts reveal a striking ambivalence present as individuals come to grips with how a new technology is changing their understanding of themselves. Even as print is embraced as a new medium we see a conflicting negative reaction including anxiety over an imagined mechanical future and nostalgia for an imagined embodied past. In this context, metaphors present bodies and books as though similar enough to be interchangeable, but those using these metaphors (in plays and elsewhere) come away with a sense of loss. A loss present even in the play texts themselves, as printed remnants take the place of a living, collaborative, embodied performance.

**Simone Chess**  
**Ethics and Ambivalence: Recognizing Early Modern Expertise in Trans Archives**

I feel ambivalent about the book I'm writing—or avoiding writing—and about what it means about the ways I approach my other work, especially my work in early modern trans studies. I'd like to use this seminar paper to think through that ambivalence and what it means in both the

small scale of this book project and the larger scale of field-making within early modern scholarship. The book is about a secret history of trans expertise in Shakespeare and early modern theater, as evidenced by a surprising archive of materials written by and for trans and gender variant people. These sources, many of them decades old, offer a vibrant pre-history for the work that we now call early modern trans studies. I feel ambivalent about the fact that this archive of trans expertise is surprising, to me and likely to future readers of my book (as it has been surprising to other scholars when I share it at conferences, even within trans and queer studies networks). Simultaneously, the research and writing of the book put me in an ambivalent relationship with its subjects, with these trans people in the past who were doing the work of early modern trans studies for decades before us, but outside of and excluded from universities and therefore only in fringe and “unserious” venues and genres. What are my ethical obligations to them as I quote them and close read their work, as I benefit from their labor? What are the citational strategies that recognize and take seriously their expertise, even and especially when the forms and content of that expertise push the limits of academic rules and norm? More broadly, how can we hold at once the history of the academic field of early modern trans studies and its emergence and this less-noted prehistory, and what are the risks and rewards of doing so? Is any of this early modern studies? In the essay I will write for this seminar, I’ll aim to show you some examples of early modern expertise in trans archives, and then work to express the ambivalent excitement generated by those sources; ideally, I’ll be able to connect some of this to those bigger-picture questions about what it means to approach field-building with attention to all these ambivalences.

**Brent Dawson**  
**Ambivalent Equality in Early Modernity**

Shylock’s speech, “If you prick us do we not bleed?,” has crystallized in the popular imagination as Shakespeare’s most famous statement of common humanity. Yet, looked at closely, the terms in which it asserts equality do not seem all that human, whether blood, organs, senses, emotion, frailty to harm, exposure to the environment, or a drive for self-preservation. This paper locates *Merchant of Venice* as an early example within an archive of emerging, ambivalent articulations of what it calls *low equality* in early modern England that starkly differ from the later, liberal versions of equality most famously espoused by Locke. As in the period more broadly, ideas of low equality appear in *Merchant* at the same time as, and in conflict with, new theories of racial and religious inequality that also define humanness in physical terms. The play’s gruesome fascination with cutting open and exposing the body, with weighing and measuring the flesh, reflects the twined contours of this conflict: between fantasies of separating and distinguishing pure from impure blood, and tentative senses that one person is no different than another on the lowest level of physical stuff. While theories of low equality are ambivalently espoused in the early modern period and highly limited from a modern perspective, I argue they are nevertheless important to study, as the erasure of the body from later, canonical theories of equality is what allows for the foundational division within liberalism, analyzed by Mills’ *Racial Contract* among others, between a *formal equality* located in the abstract qualities of human nature and a *racial inequality* anchored in physical difference.

**Kyle DiRoberto**  
**Veneration and Violence: Gender, Power, and Ambivalence**  
**in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus***

This paper delves into the complex cultural phenomenon wherein women are simultaneously venerated and subjected to violence, a duality that stirs deep outrage, propels narrative arcs, and evokes cathartic responses that go nowhere. Central to this exploration is Shakespeare's portrayal of Lavinia, which draws on ancient Roman sources, especially the emotional qualities that characterized the experience of female characters in the works of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and *Fasti*. These texts inspired writings across disciplines and eras. Shakespeare realized Lavinia from the same works that evoked the discourse of liberty and republicanism (Virginia and Lucretia), but then used them to construct his most savagely violated character. It examines these feminine characters as victims and symbols of resistance, noting the ambiguity of this societal inclusion and exclusion in *Titus Andronicus*.

**Lars Engle**  
**Ambivalence, Moral Luck, and the Endings of *Hamlet***

Insofar as our shared readings have invited us to think about ambivalence as a structure rather than a chronic or transient affect, structural ambivalence has been framed as a response to the unequal distribution of moral luck. Inequalities of opportunity, of resources, of respect, marked by archives which testify to categorical structural cruelties that a good deal of social and legal restructuring has failed to eradicate in our lamentable present, give rise to structural ambivalence that might be a reverberation of structural anger or indignation. Reflection on how that social movements march on assertions of shared feelings -- usually a mixture of anger and hope on the left -- can lead to what one might call engaged ambivalence, which I take the multi-authored essay we've all read to raise as a topic to think about.

I will write about ambivalence and moral luck in *Hamlet*, noticing how Hamlet's philosophical sensitivity to the operations of moral luck (as described by Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel, and Martha Nussbaum) manifests in his ambivalence about his own actions and his privileged position. I'll argue that the endings of the play arouse ambivalence rather than quelling it.

**Christine Hoffmann**  
***The Faerie Queene's* Forms of Escape**

In book III of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Britomart is understandably perplexed by the instructions in the House of Busirane, *Be bold ... be not too bold* – words which invite her typical movement [she is the “bold Britoness” (III.xii.1)] and simultaneously discourage it. Ultimately, Britomart's survival is not dependent on her solving this rhetorical puzzle, but I suggest that readers of *The Faerie Queene* should take up the challenge to imagine the particulars of a peculiar and ambivalent affect—the hows, wheres, whys, etc. of being/feeling “not too bold.”

I explore two intertwined consequences of stepping into the lacuna inserted by the self-interrupting imperative *Be bold ... be not too bold*: 1) identification of compelling instances of “not too bold” affective behavior in twenty-first-century experience and 2) a new formalist analysis of *The Faerie Queene*’s allegorical and romantic structures. I propose the escape room as a twenty-first-century complement to the experience of reading *The Faerie Queene* because, while these rooms advertise character-based and narrative-driven adventures, I believe their draw is their formalist immersion. Like Spenser’s epic, escape rooms appeal as “endlesse work” (IV.xii.1), their every object available as a potential key to an arbitrarily organized puzzle whose relation to a framing narrative is equally errant. I want to speculate on the rise in availability and popularity of these immersive games in a time of climate anxiety, and develop my current hypothesis, which is that escape rooms are a space for putting “not too bold” affect into practice.

**Sawyer Kemp**  
**The Ambivalent Histories of Aniseed Water Robin**

This paper draws on Traub et al.’s feminist theorization of ambivalence to develop an ongoing research project about the historical intersex person and 17<sup>th</sup> century street vendor Aniseed Water Robin. In this theorization of texts about Robin, I argue that the genealogy and scholarly record of ‘evidence’ of this person have treated intersexuality with tactical ambivalence. That is, the historical category of “hermaphrodite” has been leveraged ambivalently to signify excess of varying gender configurations: Robin is treated in some poems as an evident man with fantastical reproductive capacities; in other periodicals and rogue narratives they appear as an enchanting, entrapping woman. No surprise there; excessive, monstrous androgyny is indeed a transphobia as old as time itself. However, this ambivalent dualism is reified by the enduring archives of Robin: on one hand, “Aniseed Water Robin” is remembered as the name of a dance set down in John Playford’s *The Dancing Master*, reprinted many times and eventually acquiring the secondary title *The Irish Lady*. Robin’s other legacy is in Daniel Defoe’s 1726 treatise *A Brief Case on the State of the Distillers and the Distilling Trade in England*. Defoe, making an economic case against the practice of purchasing liquor from the Dutch, uses a masculinized revisionist version of Robin as an emblem of British ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit (no pun intended) for “his” canny brewing of aniseed water—which Defoe claims as a domestic precursor to gin. This set of contradictory histories begets a series of ambivalent questions: how does and should the history of a slur like ‘hermaphrodite’ be taken into the archives of intersex and transgender life? How does the ambivalent relationship between intersex and trans activism cohere or diverge when reading a character like Robin? How does evidence of intra-community transphobia—for instance, Moll Frith’s alleged diary entry about Aniseed Water Robin which smacks of transmisogyny despite Frith being valorized as a trans/enby icon—impact how early modern trans studies contributes to contemporary trans discourse? In this essay, I will work to tease out some of these contradictions and hope to use ambivalence to produce a nuanced archive of the fraught histories surrounding and about Aniseed Water Robin.

**Sam Kolodezh**

**Performing Shakespeare Ambivalently: Camp and Theatre of the Ridiculous**

Two recent productions, Taylor Mac's *Gary: A Sequel To Titus Andronicus* and Fake Friend's *Circle Jerk* have revived Ridiculous Theatre and particularly the legacy of Charles Ludlam in more mainstream theatre discourse. Ludlam, the Ridiculous Theatre, and camp, in general, has an ambivalent relationship with the early modern, which often lends itself to camp and queer aesthetics. Ludlam drew on Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and *Faust*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and a variety of other early modern inspirations and adaptations. Mac's play is a sequel and adaptation to *Titus Andronicus* and *Circle Jerk* features a Shakespearean-style chorus played out by a troll that narrates, guides, and trolls the action of the play. These adaptations and appropriations of Shakespearean and early modern aesthetics are both seriously engaged with real and imagined contemporary discourse about the early modern and irreverent towards it. Continuing Berlant's logic of ambivalence relating to the power and politics of sex and humor, I am interested in thinking through the ambivalent relationship that Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatre has to Shakespeare and the early modern. I am also interested in engaging more specifically with the relationship between parody (especially as Bataille conceptualizes it), ambivalence, and camp. How can the ambivalent relationship between the campy of Ridiculous Theatre and the early modern help articulate politics and temporalities of the early modern in the present?

**Noémie Ndiaye**

**Black in the Seraglio:**

**White World-Making and the Aesthetics of Ambivalence in Restoration Drama**

This paper focuses on the ambivalence that early modern Europeans felt towards Black Muslims. They could not but acknowledge the economic and military superiority of Islamic cultures, and when faced with Black Muslims, they found that power impossible to reconcile with the ongoing project of racializing Blackness. If to be a Muslim meant always already being a potential enslaver of Christians in the Mediterranean world, and if being Black meant always already being enslaveable by Christians, then a Black Muslim was an oxymoron. To become unambiguously enslaveable, Black Muslims had to be *un-muslimed*, i.e. to lose the power to enslave—and I see this fictional process of un-mooring at play in European drama. In this segment, I focus on the participation in those dynamics of the enslaved Black eunuch who became a staple of English Restoration drama, and I draw on #Emotrans scholarship to understand the frequent association of this character with the proliferating motif of bodily cutting directed towards the self and towards (Muslim) others.

**Jennifer Nicholson**

**Ambivalent affect in *The Winter's Tale***

Reading *The Winter's Tale*, rather than watching it in performance, is a distinctly ambivalent experience. Leontes' role as tyrannical lynchpin is far more apparent to me as a reader, not least because any affection that he may have remaining for Polixenes, Camillo, Hermione, or Paulina would largely come across as gesture and expression in Act I. His affection, variously at odds with his speech when he does become consumed by jealousy, makes his decline powerful and

unsettling. John Fletcher conceived of tragicomedy as a form that “wants [is in need of] deaths...yet brings some neere it, wich is inough to make it no comedie” (Beaumont and Fletcher, Works, 3.497). What, then, are we to make of the losses that Paulina and Hermione experience? Antigonus and Mamillius’ deaths at Leontes’ hand burgeon out beyond the genre. Furthermore, Christopher Wheeldon’s three act ballet of *The Winter’s Tale* capitalises, by necessity, on the power of gesture. However, there is something to be said for the residual impact of language and of genre even when the tale is adapted for dance. Mamillius’ statue is also present at the end of Wheeldon’s production, bringing a kind of readerly re-awareness of that specific loss that couples with Leontes’ insistence that Paulina marry Camillo. Taking these observations about readership, genre and gesture into account, this paper will consider the ambivalent responses we might have when we consider the rather one-dimensional characters of *The Winter’s Tale* existing in its complexly crafted, three-dimensional literary world.

**Clifford Werier**  
**On Being a Jew, Teaching *The Merchant of Venice***

Over the course of a long career, I was privileged to teach most of Shakespeare’s plays, but none did I approach more ambivalently than *The Merchant of Venice*. In fact, I avoided teaching *The Merchant of Venice* for many years because I realized that I could not approach it authentically without making it personal. Taking advantage of the invitation to write a non-traditional paper, I will compose a memoir which considers ambivalence generated by the convergence of Shakespeare’s anti-Semitic portrayal of Shylock the Jew with my own traumatic “coming out” as a Jewish professor in the classroom. In the process, I will investigate the problematic category of “Jew,” both within the play, within the larger culture, and within my own complex Jewish identities, which are simultaneously racial and cultural, but which remain, for the most part, invisible and secret. Ambivalence as a critical practice offers a way of structuring my narrative around notions of complexity and paradox, as I unravel a series of multiple attractions, aversions and ambivalences and their powerful pedagogical consequences.