Thanks to my Spring 2011 Faculty Development Grant, I was able to attend the 10th Annual Hawaii International Conference on Social Sciences (HICSS) in Honolulu, Hawaii, June 1-5, 2011, where I presented my paper, “Reclaiming Women’s Bodies: Wangechi Mutu and the Aesthetics of Violence.”

http://ospace.otis.edu/ysamuel/Wangetchi_Mutu/published

Working on production of Wangechi Mutu’s print portfolio Eve (2006) furthered my interest in her anthropological, sociological, and political approach to her art, leading to this research project: exploring the relationship between aestheticized forms of violence against women and Mutu’s reclamation, re-presentation, and regeneration of women’s bodies. This project is part of a series of ongoing articles I have been writing on women in the visual arts. Because I was taking a cross-disciplinary approach to exploring Mutu’s work, I looked forward to presenting my paper to an audience from across the disciplines. HICCS promised to be a good fit.

Co-sponsored by the University of Louisville’s Center for Sustainable Urban Neighborhoods, the goal of HICSS is to provide academics and professionals with cross-disciplinary interests the opportunity for discourse within and outside their own disciplines. I was especially interested in participating in this conference because of the diversity of participants from around the world and the broad array of viewpoints they would bring to the table based on their geographical, cultural, political, social, and linguistic orientations. 250 participants from 15 countries attended the conference.

The conference format consisted of four days of thoroughly engaging paper sessions, workshops, panel discussions, and poster sessions interweaving all areas of the Social Sciences. Many of us took advantage of the relaxed aloha atmosphere and available AV equipment to cross-reference and hold sessions in addition to those scheduled.

From zeitgeist to pedagogy, each topic touched on areas of personal and professional interest, and aspects of courses I teach. A sample includes: the Italian Gastarbeiter (foreign worker) in Germany; the relationship between gender, culture, and past experience in the interpretation of works by Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gillman, Joyce Carole Oates, and Henry James; an historical and spatial history of male circumcision; building Learning Communities across disciplines; and social constructs in developmental education classes.

The keynote address: “Hawai‘i – The Legacy of Literacy,” was particularly fascinating because I majored in journalism before defecting to the English Department. The speakers, Dr. Puakea Nogelmeir, Hawaiian language professor at University of Hawai‘i, and Kau‘I Sai-Dudoit, Director of Ho-olaupai, the Hawaiian Newspaper Resource, brought me full circle. Hawai‘i’s rich literary history – legends, stories, chants, songs,
and compositions from oral tradition – were first written down in the 1820s and disseminated through the newspaper: “the repository of knowledge.” Hawaiian language, literacy, and literature flourished, and the newspaper was the vehicle. Between 1834 and 1948, Hawaiians generated over one hundred different Hawaiian-language newspapers, revitalizing language, archiving history, and elevating the newspaper to the status of books.

My paper was very well received and stimulated the kind of discussion I had hoped for. Mutu’s provocative work charges the viewer with a myriad of interpretations, and these were plentiful. An African Studies professor from Ghana opened up the Q & A by addressing the nature of the taboo in Africa, and this became a focal point for looking at Mutu’s highly sexualized female hybrid forms through a multi-cultural lens. Because Mutu is more interested in hybrid cultures than in original cultural identity, it was interesting that all of the participants were, as Mutu would put it, part of the AlieNation – world citizens whose cultural identities are changeable and self-determined. It resonated that just as Mutu’s images are a composite, she is a composite, transcending stereotypes on an artistic level.

As adjunct faculty, for whom conferences aren’t budgeted, Faculty Development Grants are an especially important source of funding. Presenting this paper advanced me professionally and provided me valuable exposure. I was proud to represent Otis College of Art and Design, and will do so again when I present my next paper, “Staging the Homemade, Ready-Made, and Unpaid in Guy Ben Ner’s Stealing Beauty,” at the Global Perspectives in Theatre session at the PAMLA Conference at Scripps College, Claremont, November 2011:

http://ospace.otis.edu/ysamuel/Guy_Ben-Ner/published