

Lenaya Stewart

My name is Lenaya Stewart and I am a senior English major with minors in creative writing and rhetoric. This summer I had the privilege of being a scholar in the Ronald E. McNair Summer Research Institute on campus. As an English major who has now applied to several English PhD programs, the McNair Program was the perfect opportunity to get familiar with the graduate level research process. In six weeks I completed a full research project, including abstract, literature review, data, conclusions and at the close of the program I had an oral and poster presentation. Due to my dedication to academic excellence, research and community service I was awarded the 2014 Arts and Humanities Dean's Senior Scholar Award.

When I began my research for the McNair program I only had a broad idea of what I wanted to study. As an English Honors student I am currently finishing "Another Black Experience," a project that combines scholarly research and my own poetry to analyze the transitory nature of racial identifications. This project seeks to cognize the African American community, as shown in literature, based on life experiences. While researching black artistic movements for this project, I found myself on the fifth floor of McKeldin Library reading *A Son's Return: Selected Essays of Sterling Brown*. I was immediately drawn to the strength of the narrative voice created through the bluntness of language. For example, in "The Negro in Washington," Brown never hesitated to depict what he considered to be the "real" Washington D.C. In Mark A. Sander's introduction to Brown's essays he argues "the New Negro Movement constituted the politically self-conscious attempt on the part of African-Americans to define themselves as post-slavery, post-agrarian people." For the first time I questioned, what is a Renaissance?

Soon I was questioning more than just the definition of a Renaissance, but the motivating cultural factors behind the name. What event thrusts a Renaissance into life? Who has the authority to label an artistic period a Renaissance? What techniques do Renaissance writers wield that transcend beyond their time period? These questions drive my research concentration in examining underlying structural and thematic patterns in the English and Harlem Renaissance.

Before participating in the McNair program I had utilized many of the Maryland library resources, especially areas such as researchport, interlibrary loans, and the numerous periodical and primary source databases. Despite this previous experience, I was at a complete loss when it became time to begin my summer research. My project was overseen by Dr. Laura Rosenthal in the English Department and she encouraged me to begin by first getting a grasp of the scholarly conversations surrounding my topic. I only had two days to create an expansive literary review and so I immediately set to work. Since I was more familiar with online resources, I rented a mac from the technology desk and begin randomly key word searching through numerous databases. However, it quickly became obvious that the research question I was probing was not answerable from online articles alone.

Seeing my frustration, a librarian asked if there was something he could help me with. Embarrassed, I admitted that I was working on a research project and had no idea where to begin. He advised that I first search for one good source within my research field in the database and that I then study the bibliography and pull all the books that book cited. It seemed like a crazy idea, but I followed his advice. To my surprise McKeldin had all the books either in the library or through inter-library loan. After trudging home 20+ books I set to work reading and used the libraries online citing tool to help keep my notes organize. Immediately I saw a pattern, English Renaissance and Reformation scholars almost always mentioned John Donne and

Harlem Renaissance scholars always cited Langston Hughes. I only had four remaining weeks to finish my research and decided that I would have a stronger research project if I focused on a smaller sample size and only studied one famous writer each community.

I returned triumphant to Dr. Rosenthal's office pitching my new focused research scope. I expected her to be surprised with my change in plans, but she only smiled. As I took notes on her words of advice, it became clear that she had been waiting all along for me to narrow my scope. After deciding to focus my research on John Donne and Langston Hughes I hit my next major snag. Each writer was prolific in their time, and there was an extraordinary amount of poetry, essays, sermons, and other documents to shift through. As an English major I was delighted to lie around and read each writer's work, but I could never forget that I was running out of time and had yet to find the link between the two writers.

While sitting in Footnotes half asleep, half reading Rampersad's two-volume biography on Langston Hughes I suddenly thought of the trees and birds that were reoccurring images in Hughes poetry, and the roses and hills that often appeared in Donne's secular verses. Literally jumping from my seat I ran back to the fifth floor of McKeldin in search of Hughes' collected works. I knew that images of nature were the connecting factor, an unusual aspect of both writers poetry as both Donne and Hughes were city poets, and not members of the pastoral lyric community. I completed my project and have since presented my research at the UMBC McNair Conference and received positive feedback.

In "The Racial Mountain", Langston Hughes argued that "an artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose." This summer I didn't just learn how to create and answer a research question, but how to bend under pressure and not break. I prioritized time and took advantage of all the library resources I could find. McKeldin's abundance of "ready to read" books made it possible for me to analyze the scholarly conversations surrounding my topics and insert my own voice into the argument.