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Kramer Studies Sexuality Through Comparative Literature

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“It’s amazing how ignorant people are about their immediate neighbors—the Germans about the Dutch, the Germans about the Poles, and so on. A lot of countries are unaware that you live right next door. I needed to branch out. In today’s globalized world, it’s easy to make the argument that it’s important to know a little bit about our neighbors as well as about far-flung countries.” That’s how Dr. Max Kramer, a native of Germany, explains his interest in comparative literature.

Kramer has degrees from both La Sorbonne in Paris and Columbia University in New York and today is an assistant professor in the Department of Modern Languages and Comparative Literature in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College/CUNY.

He explains that, even though he is not a professor of political science, he is following issues connected to the unity and the dismembering of Europe with a great deal of interest. “A globalized world opens a lot of doors for those who can handle a lot of doors, but those who aren’t prepared for it won’t necessarily benefit from this opening up. Among those for whom it isn’t any sort of advantage, there’s a stronger resolve to return to their smaller worlds,” says he.

Kramer has also studied the topics of male bonding and homosexuality, which do not necessarily mean the same thing. “Male bonding is also called homosociality, and I’m not just studying this from today’s point of view; I’m studying it in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century. Male bonding in groups, as a German phenomenon, is what I worked on for an article about youth movements in Germany. These groups could include homosexual or homoerotic tendencies, but they were built around a much bigger ethos of fraternity or male comradeship, which actually outright excluded homosexuals.”

One of his publications on this subject is entitled “Translating Queer Sexual Identity”



Photo by Amanda Becker.

Dr. Kramer (right) being interviewed for the radio show “College Talk.”

and deals with how that phenomenon has been interpreted over time. “I got intrigued by looking at a translation of western European poets from the 1920s versus a translation from the 1970s. They changed a lot, especially in connection with my subject matter of sexuality—with sexual descriptions or with metaphorical descriptions of sexuality. The way translators chose to translate a particular word or line can change tremendously.”

Kramer continues to explain that, “In the 1920s and 1930s, there was a strong tendency to heterosexualize whatever content there was in a poem. The sense that this content is actually sort of homoerotic and that in translation we should keep it as such by putting it in an ambiguous way is something that only arises in the 1970s—a desire to be more truthful to the original.”

When asked if he thinks that a strictly heterosexual person will have more trouble

getting those messages and understanding those nuances than someone who is part of the LGBTQ community, Kramer responds, “I think that the poets of the nineteenth and twentieth century were directing their messages in a twofold way. They had one overt way of transmitting a message, which was that a poem was innocuous: it talks about flowers or about doves, eagles, and some naked girls, so yeah, it’s a beautiful poem. But the queer-sensitive reader can read another sort of message in it. The ambiguity may actually speak to her or to him.”

Kramer has been working lately with North African literature on this topic, which is interesting because, on one hand, you have countries with a strong Islamic influence and, on the other hand, countries that were colonies of European countries until the 1950s. Given this combination, one wonders what he has found that makes literature from this part of the world distinctive.

“The nineteenth century is famous for its English and French narratives about going to the ‘Orient’ and having fun there in a way that you couldn’t have in Europe, because Europe was much more of a repressive place for sexuality in the nineteenth century than North Africa,” explains Kramer. “Basically, North Africa and the Muslim world more generally were an Eden for sexual pleasures that you couldn’t obtain in Europe at the time. You have all these people like Oscar Wilde who go to Africa to have this kind of experience.”

“In a post-colonial context, hostility toward homosexuality has almost become a tool for colonized countries to take revenge and mark themselves as African or Muslim or Arab, and so on. We are partly the victims of the antagonism between former colonizers and colonized countries.”

Kramer concludes by discussing the barriers that he has had to overcome to do his research in those countries. “Homosexuality is illegal in these places, so it’s difficult to do research. Because you can’t do research on an institutional level, it becomes difficult to do research at all. But nowadays we have the Western paradigm, which is that at some point you realize you are homosexual, and it becomes a moment of visibility—you want to have a coming out, and so on. There is a narrative that culminates in gay marriage or in marriage for all. Although this narrative is a Western thing that was born out of nineteenth century and became a general thing in the twentieth century, now it’s traveling everywhere in the world and is influencing the local narratives. I only know one local paradigm, but I am finding evidence of its influence in distant places.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/260068808> He can be contacted via Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu