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Contact:
Andrew Morris, Department Chair,
Cal Poly Department of History
805-756-2845; admorris@calpoly.edu

Kathleen Murphy
Cal Poly Department of History
805-756-2839; ksmurphy@calpoly.edu

Cal Poly History Professor Awarded American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship

SAN LUIS OBISPO—Kathleen S. Murphy, assistant professor of history at Cal Poly, has received a fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) for the 2013-14 academic year.

The award supports research in the humanities and humanistic social sciences that the council considers to be particularly promising. Murphy received the fellowship to support her research into the history of science of the slave trade.

“Kate Murphy is an outstanding faculty member who excels in teaching and research” said Doug Epperson, dean of Cal Poly College of Liberal Arts. “This award confirms what we have always believed; Professor Murphy is one of the top young scholars in the country within this area. In addition to advancing her research, this award will inform her teaching, benefitting countless future Cal Poly students.”

Cal Poly has awarded Murphy a sabbatical for 2012-13 that, with the ACLS fellowship, will allow her to be relieved of teaching duties for next year and focus on researching and writing her book manuscript, “Slaving Science: Natural Knowledge and the British Slave Trade, 1660-1807.” It will be the first book-length study to examine the intersection of the history of science and the history of the British slave trade.

Murphy argues that the particularities of the British slave trade shaped the knowledge produced through its networks and that scientific knowledge, in turn, influenced the development of the slave trade. “We have a tendency to think of the development of early modern science and the transatlantic slave trade as wholly unconnected,” Murphy said. “My research shows that, in fact, they were deeply intertwined.”

In the first half of her book, Murphy will explore how British naturalists exploited the slave trade to advance natural knowledge and reveal how naturalists recruited slave ship surgeons and captains to collect scientific specimens along the routes of the slave trade, while engaged in the purchase of African captives. In the second half, Murphy emphasizes the ways scientists and scientific thinking shaped the slave trade. These chapters examine the efforts of scientists and medical practitioners to engineer a healthier and more profitable slave ship and how abolitionists employed the methodologies and genres of science to advocate for the end of the slave trade in the closing decades of the 18th century.

Murphy’s research employs archival materials gathered from repositories in Great Britain, Spain, Sweden and the U.S., including from the British Library, the British National Archives, the Natural History Museum in London, the Biblioteca Nacional de España, the University of Uppsula, the American Philosophical Society, and the John Carter Brown Library. She mines scientific treatises, slaving companies’ records, and correspondence to tell the stories of British slaving and science largely absent from the existing scholarship.

Murphy joined the faculty at Cal Poly in 2007. She teaches courses in early American history and the history of science and co-directs the History Department’s internship program.

The ACLS is a private, nonprofit federation of 71 national scholarly organizations that seeks to advance studies in all fields of learning in the humanities and related social sciences. The council offers fellowships and grants in more than a dozen programs. In the international competition for ACLS fellowships this year, 65 of 1121 projects were funded (25 at the national level, 40 at the institutional level). This year’s asymmetric distribution reflects the growth in institutional support of ACLS fellowships over time and the increasing competitiveness of the fellowship program.
The fellowship is funded by many institutions and individuals, including the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and individual friends of the ACLS.