



In summer of 2018, Comparative Literature graduate student Elisabeth Fertig was awarded a Comparative Literature Internship Fellowship to work at the radio station KMRD in Madrid, New Mexico. Read about her experience below!

Last spring, as I was nearing the end of my second term as a Comp Lit PhD student at UM, I was considering how I might begin gathering my scattered fascinations together under the umbrella of a single project. I entered the program with a set of worries about the alienated state of the world in general and of the institution in particular—accompanied by a reflexive interest in the nature of that anxiety as an unspoken apocalyptic mythology—which remain priorities. In my research, I planned to ask: what types of positive social change can intellectual work achieve, how, and from what position?

In the past two semesters, I've gravitated to the highly theoretical yet socially conscious texts of public scholars like Arendt, Sontag, Benjamin, Adorno, Derrida, Baudrillard. I believe intellectual work is meaningful work, but I also believe that academic discourse suffocates in the isolation of a climate-controlled seminar room. I'm invested in nurturing in my own research agenda a dimension that is interactive, material, spontaneous, local, and creative.

Trying to work out where this leads me in practice has sparked a deepening interest in the relationship between (self-) knowledge, storytelling and community—specifically in the format of independent media like local alt-weeklies, as well as community radio and other forms of public broadcasting. It was during this process that I learned of KMRD from my college friends J and L. They had discovered Madrid through Will and Stella, come through to check it out, and ended up making a home there. It can be a harsh and dangerous place to live, but they stayed on for the sense of community and creative freedom. Now they both have radio shows.

I began to listen to KMRD's live web stream nonstop while finishing my term papers and planning my summer research, and was captivated, to the extent that it certainly influenced my writing. The extreme diversity of programming, the vulnerability I heard in the DJs' on-air commentary and conversations, the emphasis on storytelling and genuine curiosity reminded me of what I value about scholarship.

Thanks to the Comp Lit Internship Fellowship, I was able to design a summer project in which I lived in Madrid and worked at KMRD for three weeks. I entered that internship with a set of questions central to my graduate work. Practically: what is the radio station's role in its community? To what degree is this a viable template for promoting institutions of public scholarship? On a more theoretical level, I was interested to test how the apocalyptic and media theoretical themes I'd been investigating in my research and coursework might come together with poetry, broadcasting, and public scholarship on this idiosyncratic stage.

Some of my original questions remain open, for example: is Madrid an isolated case, or is independent radio a viable model for bringing together communities around scholarship and the arts in other settings? If the small scale is a fundamental element of the station's success, would the repetition or amplification of such an institution diminish its value? Other takeaways are more concrete. Among my roles at KMRD, I drafted a packet of informational materials for, and helped plan, the station's next underwriting campaign, which helped me gain insight into station operations.