



Compass Interdisciplinary Virtual Conference

- 2009 -

Conference Paper Abstracts and Commentators

Beyond 'Good' and 'Evil': Breaking Down Binary Oppositions in Holocaust Representations of 'Privileged' Jews

Adam Brown
Deakin University

Abstract

In 1986, Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi's paradigmatic essay entitled 'The Grey Zone' highlighted the complex and sensitive issue of so-called 'privileged' Jews, an issue that remains at the margins of popular and academic discourse on the Holocaust. 'Privileged' Jews include those prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps and ghettos who held positions that gave them access to material and other benefits whilst compelling them to act in ways which have been judged both self-serving and harmful to fellow inmates. The unprecedented ethical dilemmas that confronted 'privileged' Jews may be viewed as exemplifying the 'limit' events or experiences that were characteristic of the Holocaust, situating them at the threshold of representation, understanding and judgement. Levi's essay singles out history and film as particularly predisposed to a simplifying trend he identifies – the 'Manichean tendency which shuns half-tints and complexities,' and resorts to the black-and-white binary opposition(s) of 'friend' and 'enemy,' 'good' and 'evil.' In the case of 'privileged' Jews in particular, such binary oppositions would appear to be inadequate. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates the fields of history, philosophy and literature, this paper considers representations of 'privileged' Jews, particularly those prisoners of the *Sonderkommandos* who were forced to work in the crematoria. The paper demonstrates how easily the boundary Levi maps out for moral judgement can be crossed. It is shown that while Levi suggests judgement should be suspended when confronted with the experiences of victims *in extremis*, moral evaluations of 'privileged' Jews

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permeate discussions and representations of the Holocaust. When confronted with such emotionally and morally freighted issues, judgement may itself be seen as a 'limit of representation.'

Commentator: Jean-Marc Dreyfus (University of Manchester)

Communicating about Communication: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Educating Educators about Language Variation

Anne H. Charity Hudley
Department of English
The College of William and Mary

and

Christine Mallinson
Language, Literacy & Culture Program
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Abstract

The quest to educate non-standardized English-speaking students has been a primary driving force behind developments in many fields represented by Compass journals, including sociology, geography, linguistics, psychology, history, literature, and education. Academics engaged in these multiple perspectives must join together, both to communicate knowledge about language variation to educators and to learn from educators' experiences with teaching non-standardized English-speaking students.

Following the conference theme of breaking down barriers, we draw on research gathered from multidisciplinary approaches to educational analysis by developing a *linguistic awareness* model that is designed to facilitate the sharing of knowledge about language variation between educators and researchers. Our model currently addresses three U.S.-based English language varieties: School English, Southern English, and African-American English. Drawing on these models, we highlight best teaching practices that can help non-standardized English-speaking students break down communication barriers to educational success in the pre-collegiate classroom.

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We draw on previous endeavors by academics to communicate information about language variation to wider audiences, noting two important challenges: the need to couple language variation awareness with readily accessible, specific examples of language variation and the need to provide information about how to work with language variation within the increasingly diverse classroom. We contend that only with this specific knowledge can educators use linguistic information to help students from non-standardized English-speaking backgrounds achieve in schools. Otherwise, educators may not appreciate the relevance and immediate necessity of the information.

In our *linguistic awareness* model, we suggest realistic, cost effective ways to approach educators, including certification and re-certification courses, in-service workshops, websites, and wikis. A wiki of materials to accompany this paper may be found at <http://charityhudleymallinsoncompass.wmwikis.net/>. We also suggest future directions for linguistically aware educators to become resources for information on language variation and linguistic tolerance in their own schools and communities.

Commentators:

Becky Childs (Coastal Carolina University)

Kristen Denham (Western Washington University)

Sonja Lanehart (University of Texas at San Antonio)

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'Recycling Modernity: Towards an Environmental History of Waste'

Tim Cooper
University of Exeter

Abstract

This article examines recent writing on the concept of waste from a range of disciplinary perspectives, and highlights some of the analytical work that the concept of waste can do. In particular it looks at the work of two authors, John Scanlan and Zsuzsa Gille, who in different ways have articulated the operation of waste within modernity both as a residue of progress and as the subject of disciplinary techniques of government. The article then suggests some of the ways in which environmental historians have already taken up the study of waste as a theme, and some of the possibilities which the insights of Scanlan and Gille contain for the further development of a critically engaged historiography of environmental transformation.

Commentators:

Zsuzsa Gille (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)
John Scanlan (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Cultural Sociology and Other Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity in the Cultural Sciences

Diana Crane
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

The subject of this paper is the relationship between cultural sociology and approaches to culture in other social science disciplines. What are the characteristics of the theoretical environment in which cultural sociology is operating? The paper begins by reviewing the literature on interdisciplinarity. Many authors argue that interdisciplinarity is increasing or should be increasing, but the general consensus is that disciplinary isolation is the norm. From this perspective, the relationships between disciplines can be understood in terms of *trading zones* in which fields in different disciplines have little in common, theoretically or empirically. Interdisciplinary

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communication in 'trading zones' requires that participants laboriously construct a set of terms that permits them to exchange ideas.

Alternatively, I propose that clusters of fields in different disciplines are linked by *free-floating paradigms*. Participants in disciplines that share 'free-floating paradigms' are able to communicate with one another more readily. The paper presents evidence for the second interpretation, drawn from survey articles in disciplinary handbooks. Disciplines and fields in which the study of culture draws from the same pool of paradigms and models and shares a set of lines of inquiry with cultural sociology include traditional disciplines, such as anthropology, communication, geography, history and psychology and interdisciplinary fields, such as cultural studies, communication, feminist theory, material culture, science studies, and visual culture. Interdisciplinary fields, particularly cultural studies, perform an important role in diffusing paradigms across disciplinary boundaries. Free-floating paradigms are associated with the work of major theorists, such as Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Bourdieu, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Clifford Geertz, Bruno Latour, Adorno, Gramsci, and Habermas.

Commentators:

Gabriel Ignatow (University of North Texas)

Mark Jacobs (George Mason University)

Theorizing Borders in a 'Borderless World': Globalization, Territory and Identity

Alexander C. Diener
Pepperdine University

and

Joshua Hagen
Marshall University

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Abstract

Although declarations or predictions of a borderless world have become somewhat ubiquitous over the last twenty years, state borders remain one of the most basic and visible features of the international system. While it is true that a range of issues, like environmental change, migration, or international trade, highlight the growing interaction and interdependence between different places around the world, borders continue to play a central role in shaping, dividing, and uniting the world's societies, economies, and ecosystems. Reflecting their significance for scholars across the social sciences, a growing body of multidisciplinary research has investigated the continuing power of borders in our supposedly borderless world. This article examines some of the main lines of inquiry, research, and theory in this emerging field of border studies.

Commentators:

Carl Grundy-Warr (National University of Singapore)

Victor Konrad (Carleton University)

Climate–Suicide Relationships: A Research Problem in Need of Geographic Methods and Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives

P. Grady Dixon

Mississippi State University

and

Adam J. Kalkstein

United States Military Academy

Abstract

Many locations on Earth experience peaks in suicide rates during the late spring and early summer, and there is evidence that climatic variables may be causal factors. Beyond this seasonal characteristic, there is little consistency in the results of various climate–suicide studies. Almost all of the published climate–suicide research has been conducted by mental health experts with relatively little input from geographers and/or climatologists, thus highlighting the need for future collaborative efforts. Previous research has

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shown how the use of a single statistical method, as opposed to multiple methods, can yield misleading or confusing results. Future research on climate–suicide relationships should allow for more consideration for spatial and temporal variations in climate, culture, demographics, etc. Ultimately, improved methods and the use of cross-disciplinary methods will help arrive at consistent results that identify climate variables that significantly affect suicide rates, if any exist.

Commentators:

Scott Greene (University of Oklahoma)

Victoria Likhvar (National Institute for Environmental Studies)

Neville Nicholls (Monash University)

Darren Ruddell (Arizona State University)

Text as It Happens: Literary Geography

Sheila Hones

University of Tokyo

Abstract

This article reviews the current situation in geographical work with fiction in the context of an explicitly spatial view of the writing–reading nexus as a contextualized and always emerging geographical event. It argues that this way of conceptualizing the text events of both narrative fiction and academic knowledge production provides a way of understanding and dealing with incompatible literary interpretations and also with irreconcilable approaches to literary geography. This openness to multiplicity develops from the point that text events are not only relational by nature and generated within social contexts in the initial encounter of author, text, and reader, but also only become publicly accessible when subsequently articulated within the mediating context of a particular social situation. The article proposes that literary geography as a collective endeavor can be developed and consolidated through an appreciation of the varying contexts within which geographically oriented work with fiction is performed and articulated.

Commentators:

Michael Crang (University of Durham)

James Kneale (University College London)

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A Hybrid Model of Moral Panics: Synthesizing the Theory and Practice of Moral Panic Research

Brian V. Klocke

Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice
State University of New York at Plattsburgh

and

Glenn W. Muschert

Department of Sociology and Gerontology
Miami University

Abstract

We seek to address criticisms of the concept of moral panics by offering a hybrid model of moral panics (MPs) that synthesizes theory and practice of MPs research. A review of the literature on MPs from sociology, media studies and related fields shows a wide variety of usage and lack of conceptual clarity of the term moral panic. Yet there are few articles explaining how to analyze MPs. We present a theoretical clarification of MPs by addressing elements of *scope*, *intensity* and *reception*, to create distinction from other related theoretical concepts. In order to develop a working method for researching MPs, one must have an understanding of social conditions that give rise to, sustain and result in the success or failure of MPs, as well as possible lasting effects. We synthesize Cohen's process-oriented model of MPs and Goode & Ben-Yehuda's attribution-oriented model of MPs, creating a critical hybrid model of moral panics that integrates processes and attributes. We then utilize the hybrid model to offer practical suggestions for researching and analyzing the conditions, processes and effects of MPs, in the hopes of encouraging a more rigorous research agenda for scholars of moral panics.

Commentators:

Sean Hier (University of Victoria)

Gary Marx (MIT)

Kenneth Thompson (Open University)

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Constructing an interdisciplinary concept of sustainable urban milieu

Nicole Mathieu
CNRS, University of Paris

Abstract

Taking Sartre's philosophy as a starting point, our paper is both theoretical and action oriented. It aims to promote the development of adequate scientific practices required by the sustainable development utopia. To this end, it is written as a manifesto designed to stimulate debate and controversy. It attempts a review of all that is being said and done in the name of sustainable development in the political domain as well as that of the relation between social sciences and politics. This paper calls for a consideration of the difficulties, and even the impossibilities, of moving "from the utopia to the concepts". Introducing and articulating the almost contradictory dimensions of sustainability in real urban territory demands the development of a relevant method in order to investigate this complex object. We propose the concept of a "socially sustainable milieu" in order to reach this objective which requires the interdisciplinary pairing of physical and social sciences. Modelling and GIS must be associated with anthropological methods. Above all, this paper underlines the need to set "inhabitants" at the heart of the scientific project. This reverses the usual focus by starting with an investigation of the way each individual reconciles the "three pillars" of sustainable development and builds their own relationship with sustainable urban milieus. This may help bypass the still top-down views of governance and enable scientists to contribute to developing the political sustainable utopia in real sites and situations.

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Sociolinguistics and Sociology: Current Directions, Future Partnerships

Christine Mallinson
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Abstract

In this article, I discuss the past, present, and future of interdisciplinary scholarship between sociolinguists and sociologists. After detailing some of the broader history of collaboration between sociolinguists and sociologists, I examine two sub-areas of scholarship: the variationist tradition from sociolinguistics and the social stratification tradition from sociology. I contend that, given their complementary research questions and analytic traditions, these areas provide new potential for interdisciplinary research initiatives. I give suggestions for research partnerships between sociolinguists and sociologists, and close with a discussion of some practical ways in which sociolinguists and sociologists can build interdisciplinarity both pedagogically as well as professionally.

Commentators:

Richard Cameron (University of Illinois at Chicago)
Robin Dodsworth (North Carolina State University)

Full Disclosure of the “Raw Data” of Research on Humans: Citizens’ Rights, Product Manufacturer’s Obligations and the Quality of the Scientific Database

Dennis J. Mazur
Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center
Oregon Health and Sciences University

Abstract

More work needs to be done across academic boundaries in the area of rights of study volunteers, consumers, and patients related to full and open disclosure of risk information related to medical products and the obligations of product manufacturers to provide this information about their medical products.

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While emphasizing risk disclosure to patients in the patient-physician relationship through the concepts of consent and informed consent, society protects the product manufacturer in many ways from its obligations of full and open disclosure of risks related to its medical products. Here, for example, product manufacturers may insist that the academic research and medical institutions and their scientific investigators—involved in securing the study volunteers for study and obligated to carefully monitor all study volunteers during study participation—not disclose new risk information to the public about new drugs being tested on human research volunteers without full permission of the product manufacturer. Here, the product manufacturer assumes it has the legal right to restrict investigators' and medical institutions' disclosure of the risks—that these parties see occurring in the study participants who are under their care—through non-disclosure contracts.

This paper reviews the origins of study volunteer, consumer, and patient rights related to risk disclosure and the obligations of product manufacturers related to disclosures related to their medical products. Here, the citizen is the research study subject who volunteers his or her participation in a research attempting to attempt to benefit present and future generations in terms of the development of scientific knowledge. With this voluntary participation, that same study volunteer agrees to bear the risks of death and morbidity from adverse outcomes that befall him or her during the research study and bears the often heavier burden of risks and effects of unknown mechanisms of action from studies of newly developed drugs. Here, the citizen is not only the study volunteer, but also the consumer and patient listening for new medical products that might be helpful to extend life or at least to improve the quality of life.

But what does it mean to say that the research study participant agrees to bear risks for the goal of development of scientific knowledge and what rights guarantee that the study sponsor, the product manufacturer, fulfills the requirements of free and open disclosure which is necessary for any development of scientific knowledge? In particular, what are the rights accorded to research study volunteers, consumers, and patients for free and open disclosure of risks related to newly designed medical products when product manufacturers' attempts to bypass their obligations of disclosing risk information to the public related to the new products under study in human volunteers as such risks become known during research trials involving humans? In this United States, the Freedom Information Act may be used to

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attempt to garner raw data related to scientific studies from federal regulators, but where is the open and free disclosure of the raw data held by product manufacturers who are the primary repositories of data related to risk information related to their products obtained from study volunteers during research trials?

Commentators:

Alicia Hall (California State University, Fresno)

Karen Melham (University of Oxford)

Waste Studies - A New Paradigm for Literary Analysis
Something is Rotten in the Denmark of *Beowulf* and *Hamlet*

Susan Signe Morrison

Texas State University – San Marcos

Abstract

The field of Waste Studies emerges out of a conversation increasingly focused on filth, rubbish, garbage, litter — even excrement — all of which are central to how we see and treat the world and those who inhabit it. In a world in which material prosperity and life itself are inevitably linked to pollution and the production of waste, how can we humans - ourselves sources of waste both bodily and in terms of all that we discard - understand and cope with it? From the garbage-filled moats of the Middle Ages to the overflowing landfills of today, waste has been and continues to be an enduring issue.

In the Kuhnian model of scientific revolutions, paradigm shifts occur when there is an accumulation of too much superfluous matter (data/information) that cannot be explained or subsumed into or under the existing paradigm. This superfluous material is waste, until a new paradigm emerges into which the excess can be subsumed, processed, and thereby understood. Waste is everywhere; we need to understand how we theorize, manage, and are implicated in waste. The paradigm shift is now.

Those who handle filth, literally or figuratively, become tainted by it morally and socially. If the scholarly action of analyzing references to filth and excrement is a suspect act, how can we talk about it? An inherently cross-disciplinary approach, Waste Studies borrow from those writing on rubbish,

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garbage, and excrement to offer ethical and moral frameworks for us to pay attention to, understand, and act on bodily, cultural, and societal waste — material aspects of our world. There is a veritable canon of anthropological, archaeological, sociological, and theoretical works that address waste as a category. Waste Studies force us to confront our own ethics, ethical position, and subjectivity.

This paper will 1) explain the approach of Waste Studies; 2) apply it to *Beowulf* and *Hamlet*, and 3) conclude by contextualizing waste within ethical and moral criticism.

Origins are key for Waste Studies since, in historicizing, we find it necessary to create waste, disposing of inconvenient moments from the past. Within each literary work, figures are discarded by the political victors: Grendel and his mother are aggressively defeated by the mercenary Beowulf; Claudius sends his nephew and rival Hamlet to be executed. Both texts emerge from periods concerned with the establishment of a new religious order: Christianity after paganism and Protestantism after Catholicism. Traces from earlier periods exist, littering society and culture.

Waste stalks *Beowulf* — in the many deaths of living beings and in the decay and destruction of culture and civilization. Cultural artefacts become trash, insignificant in the wake of violence. Waste lards Shakespeare's play as well; the leftovers are even literal - funeral meats are to be used for a wedding celebration. The famous "digressions" in *Beowulf* - the detritus, rags and tatters, recycled moments from the past - remind the poet's listeners of tragic events in the past, events that haunt the present. Ophelia spreads the detritus of popular discourse, the rags and litter of culture. Though in both works female sexuality becomes the privileged space sanctioned for the most virulent physical and verbal garbaging, male bodies are likewise subject to filth. The waste of the other is irreconcilable, but forces us to confront our own ethics, ethical position, and subjectivity. *Beowulf* enjoins us to remain thoroughly mindful of our own inevitable decay. The graveyard scene in *Hamlet* illustrates a fundamental aspect of death, that all our bodies become garbage. The "civilizing process" is just that — a process — never a finished state. Part of our civilizing process is to recognize the value of that which we deem uncivilized and to see ourselves in that threatening, filthy alterity.

Commentators:

Valerie Allen (John Jay College, CUNY)

John Scanlan (Manchester Metropolitan University)

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Equal representation of time and space: Arno Peters' universal history

Stefan Müller

University of Duisburg-Essen

Abstract

How is our world view constructed? Beside the formative ideologies of the 20th century, what is conditioning our view on social, political, and economic lives? These questions were the lifelong focus of the West German historian Arno Peters (1916-2002). He crossed borders between West and East Germany, academic disciplines (history, cartography, economy), and different fields when he published a historical atlas (*Synchnoptical World History*, 1952 ff.), drafted maps (Peters projection, 1974 ff.) and designed (but never realized) a so-called "Synchnoptikum" (mid-1960s to mid-1990s). Although he never wrote or published a classical historical work nor left an opus, his contemporaries called him a *polyhistor*.

In brief Peters' aim was the equal representation of time and space in history and geography. He was vehement in his criticism of the Europe-centered character and constant use of the Mercator projection. Peters was a critic of the historical focus on the last 500 years of world history as well as its concentration on Western civilizations, and on politics. Both maps and history books mislead readers to accept Europe and Western civilizations as history's core, thus leading to ignorance of ninety percent of world history and the majority of people living in the Southern hemisphere. Later he dealt with economics and developed a concept of a democratic economy, based on an equivalent exchange of goods. He identified modern societies with market economies as non-equivalent economies. The concept of equal representation of goods came high on Peters' agenda, after time and space.

This article reviews the fields of Peters' work, explicates his idea of world history, and gives a biographical sketch. While the Peters projection has widely been discussed and criticized, the paper focuses on the untranslated *Synchnoptical World History*, which reminds us of the 18th-century synchronistic tables. The design of a building (Synchnoptikum) resembling a panorama museum, characterized Peters as crossing the border between history as academic discipline and social intervention.

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Borderlands Studies and Border Theory: Linking Activism and Scholarship for Social Justice

Nancy A. Naples
University of Connecticut

Abstract

This paper traces contemporary trends in borderlands studies and border theory and argues for a feminist revisioning of border studies as a mode of praxis, linking activism and scholarship. I trace the trends from early borderland studies and Gloria Anzaldúa's analysis of *la frontera* to the institutionalization of border theory in the academy. Scholars influenced by Anzaldúa's work view borderlands as sites that can enable those dwelling there to negotiate the contradictions and tensions found in diverse cultural, class, and other settings. Critical perspectives of this view include concerns that there is "the tendency to construct the border crosser or the hybrid ... into a new *privileged subject of history*" (Vila 2003). I examine tension between empirically-based borderlands studies and cultural studies oriented border theory, address the limits and possibilities of an interdisciplinary border studies, and discuss the dilemmas associated with academic institutionalization and interdisciplinarity. I illustrate the feminist revisioning I recommend with three case examples chosen from contemporary feminist and queer border studies that link local struggles with cross-border organizing against violence against women, labour rights, and sexual citizenship.

Commentator:

Anna Liisa Aunio (Centre de Recherche en Éthique de l'Université de Montréal [CRÉUM])

The Status of the Learning Disabled in Philosophy of Mind and Disability Studies

Maeve M. O'Donovan
College of Notre Dame of Maryland

Conference website: <http://compassconference.wordpress.com>

Abstract

According to philosophers of mind, learning disabilities are either innate, neurological disorders or social constructions that serve to undermine responsibility attributions in educational settings. For disability theorists, in contrast, learning disabilities do not exist as such, but learning *difficulties* are the result of environments in which non-normative thinking and thinkers are labelled disabled. In both disciplines, the learning disabled are typically the objects rather than the authors of such studies. The categorization of learning difficulties as disabilities, moreover, is highly contested by thinkers in both fields.

In this essay, I review the way learning disabilities and persons with learning disabilities are portrayed in philosophy of mind and disability studies, with special attention to the methodologies and assumptions at work in these accounts. I identify misconceptions about the learning disabled person—that the person's gender is not relevant, that the person is incapable of high level academic achievement—as well as misapplications of otherwise promising methodologies—the utilization of contemporary neuroscience, the incorporation of first person accounts—both of which render problematic the existing research.

I argue that, if we are to make headway in resolving some of these disputes, we need to generate new accounts of learning disabilities and persons with learning disabilities employing a) a revised set of assumptions, most importantly that the learning disabled person experiences himself or herself as disabled, and b) an alternative methodology, that of feminist standpoint theory.

Commentator:

David Wasserman (Yeshiva University)

Fertility and Inequality Across Borders: Assisted Reproductive Technology and Globalization

Eileen Smith-Cavros
Nova Southeastern University

Conference website: <http://compassconference.wordpress.com>

Abstract

Globalization is affecting even the most private decisions people make in their lives including how to start a family. Many residents of higher income countries are beginning families later in life, as many couples commit and/or marry later and many women choose to establish themselves in careers first. Since infertility issues increase with age, these couples therefore are more likely to experience infertility issues. In addition, an increasing number of single parents and gay and lesbian couples desire to begin families. Today in higher income nations, Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) is available which allows most couples or singles wishing to start their own family to find success with their own genetic materials or with donor sperm and/or donor egg. The price of ART in higher income nations, however, is often not fully covered (or not covered at all) by insurance; and if it is covered, waiting lists can be lengthy. As a result, ART clinics have sprung up across the globe, particularly in middle income countries, and patients often travel thousands of miles from their homes to seek success at lower costs. This article surveys academic and popular literature to examine the societal, ethical, medical, and familial implications that arise with this relatively new concept of "Travel ART."

Commentators:

Jyotsna Gupta (Leiden University)

Lauren Jade Martin (The Graduate Center, CUNY)

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Human Rights, Royal Rights and the Mentally Disabled in Late Medieval England

Wendy Turner
Augusta State University

Abstract

Scholars have misunderstood and, subsequently, misrepresented the treatment, care, and custody of the mentally incapacitated of the Middle Ages. The 'mad' were protected under the laws of England, and those with property cared for by the crown. Since the appearance of Michel Foucault's work, *Madness and Civilization*, many scholars have assumed his view of the mentally disabled from literary sources of the Middle Ages as reality. Yet, Foucault's work is not history and new works have recently established that the mentally incapacitated were neither ill-treated nor excluded from society. Most mentally disabled persons remained active members of society, and beginning in the thirteenth century, those who were feudal landlords received special legal attention and care from the crown. This paper examines the crown's legal and administrative treatment of the mentally disabled in late medieval England.

Commentators:

Elizabeth Mellyn (University of New Hampshire)
Aleksandra Pfau (Hendrix College)

Language and Communication in the Spanish Conquest of America

Daniel Wasserman Soler
University of Virginia

Abstract

One of the central questions arising from the encounter between Europeans and Amerindians concerns language and communication. An encounter between two peoples that had not known about the other's existence – an encounter that scholars have long characterized as a clash of cultures – raises the question of how they managed to communicate with each other.

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Over twenty-five years ago, Tzvetan Todorov put forth one way of linking communication and conquest when he argued that Europeans conquered the Amerindians through their superior ability to understand “the Other.” More generally, he contended that Western Europeans had a general “superiority in human communication,” demonstrated by the fact that they used alphabetic writing (Todorov 251). For Todorov, Europeans displayed “remarkable qualities of flexibility and improvisation,” characteristics that allowed them to be more effective in imposing their ways of life on others (Todorov 247-8). They were so successful, Todorov argues, that in the centuries following the initial encounter between Europeans and Amerindians, Europeans were able to gradually assimilate the Other and eliminate alterity.

While Todorov’s 1982 work initially received much acclaim, since then several scholars have challenged (directly and indirectly) his claims by subjecting the encounter between Europeans and Amerindians to further study. Scholars have questioned the extent to which these groups were able to communicate with one another, and in some cases, they have questioned what Spanish conquest, authority, and domination actually mean when Spaniards and Indians had such difficulty communicating their ideas to one another. By posing these questions, scholars of varied backgrounds in anthropology, history, religion, and art history have fundamentally reshaped the field of colonial Latin American studies. They have shown that essential barriers impeded communication and understanding between Amerindians and Europeans, that both groups contributed to new cultural and religious syntheses, and that we ought to carefully reconsider the concept of an all-encompassing European conquest of the Amerindians. This paper will explore a range of scholarly works over the past twenty-five years that responds to the question of how language and communication are interrelated with conquest.

Commentators:

Patricia Seed (University of California, Irvine)
Camilla Townsend (Rutgers)

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