

Letters

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Abraham Lincoln and the Image of Photography

By Cara A. Finnegan

In November 1895, *McClure's* magazine reproduced, for the first time in public, the earliest known photograph of Abraham Lincoln. Most likely made in the early 1840s when Lincoln lived in Springfield, Illinois, the daguerreotype image presented a Lincoln that few Americans in the 1890s had seen: a well-groomed, thirtysomething gentleman. *McClure's* obtained the daguerreotype from Lincoln's only surviving child, Robert Todd Lincoln, who offered it to reporter Ida Tarbell to accompany the magazine's publication of her multi-part series on Lincoln's life. Previously known photographs of Lincoln dated only as far back as the late 1850s—well into Lincoln's public career and middle age. Thus, most readers of the 1890s would have known a much older Lincoln, one embodied in the famous (and bearded) presidential portraits made by the Mathew Brady studio during the Civil War.¹

By the mid-1890s, Lincoln was coming to replace George Washington as the political icon of the republic.² Tarbell's biography of Lincoln and the *McClure's* reproduction of the 1840s image both reflected and participated in that process of secular canonization. This new (yet older) image would allow *McClure's* readers to encounter Lincoln as a much younger man—and one more dignified-looking than many Lincoln myth-makers had

previously constructed. While pre-presidential photographs often constructed Lincoln as a raw frontier lawyer, as in the famous "tousled hair" portrait of 1857, this new image showed a youthful but more dignified and reserved man³. On seeing the daguerreotype for the first time, Tarbell later recalled that "it was another Lincoln, and one that took me by storm."⁴

Readers of the magazine apparently felt the same way, because a number of them wrote letters to the editor which were published in the December 1895 and January 1896 issues of the magazine. The letters offer rich, surprising interpretations of the photograph and thus warrant critical attention. Some readers of *McClure's* had a hard time locating their iconic Lincoln in the image. The Hon. David J. Brewer, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, wrote to the magazine, "the picture, if a likeness, must have been taken many years before I saw him and he became the central figure in our country's life. Indeed, I find it difficult to see in that face the features with which we are all so familiar."⁵ Similarly, Charles Dudley Warner of Hartford, Connecticut had a hard time seeing his recollecting Lincoln in the photograph: "The deep-set eyes and mouth belong to the historical Lincoln, and are recognizable as his features when we know that



Cara A. Finnegan

this is a portrait of him. But I confess that I should not have recognized his likeness . . . the change from the Lincoln of this picture to the Lincoln of national fame is almost radical in character, and decidedly radical in expression."⁶ Brewer's and Warner's difficulties mirrored Tarbell's own reported experience of first viewing the photograph—it was radical, a Lincoln few had seen. The only viewers,

Inside

Lincoln and the Image of Photography.....	1-5
Why the Death of Comparative Literature is a Defeat for the Humanities.....	6-7
What We Are Writing.....	8
2006-2007 Fellows.....	9
2006/2007 Graduate Student Fellows.....	9
Closing the Achievement Gap.....	10-11
Pre-Modern Race and Sexuality Symposium.....	12

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it seemed, who were able to get past their own mental images of the later Lincoln were those who had known him directly during his Illinois years. For example, Henry C. Whitney, identified in the magazine as “an associate of Lincoln's on the circuit in Illinois,” wrote to the magazine that “it is without doubt authentic and accurate; and dispels the illusion so common (but never shared by me) that Mr. Lincoln was an ugly-looking man.” Not only was this Lincoln attractive, Whitney observed, but he was also well-groomed. Implying perhaps the famed roughness of Lincoln's frontier habits, Whitney concluded bemusedly, “I never saw him with his hair combed before.”⁷

Many of the correspondents in *McClure's* noted the seeming absence of “melancholy” in Lincoln's face, a characteristic of many of the later presidential-era portraits. John C. Ropes of New York City wrote, “it is most assuredly an interesting portrait. The expression, though serious and earnest, is devoid of the sadness which characterizes the later likenesses.” Woodrow Wilson, then Professor of Finance and Political Economy at Princeton, noted that “the fine brows and forehead, and the pensive sweetness of the clear eyes, give to the noble face a peculiar charm. There is in the expression the dreaminess of the familiar face without its later sadness.”⁸ Echoing these references to Lincoln's melancholic affect, Herbert B. Addams, Professor of History at Johns Hopkins University, wrote: “The portrait indicates the natural character, strength,

insight, and humor of the man before the burdens of office and the sins of his people began to weigh upon him.”⁹

Many of the letter writers saw in the photograph shades of Lincoln's future greatness—a man whose rise to prominence was literally prefigured in his visage. Said John T. Morse to the magazine: “I have studied this portrait with very great interest. All the portraits with which we are familiar show us the man as *made*; this shows us the man *in the making*; and I think everyone will admit that the making of Abraham Lincoln presents a more singular, puzzling, interesting study than the making of any other man known in human history.”¹⁰ He concluded that “this picture, therefore, is valuable evidence as to his natural traits.”¹¹ General Francis A. Walker, President of MIT, concurred: “The present picture has distinctly helped me to understand the relation between Mr. Lincoln's face and his mind and character, as shown in his life's work . . . To my eye it *explains* Mr. Lincoln far more than the most elaborate line-engraving which has been produced.”¹²

Perhaps the most bizarre encomium to the Lincoln photograph came from Thomas B. Cooley, identified in the magazine as former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Michigan. Cooley read the photograph in the present while speculating about a future that was already past, and thus his analysis transcended temporal boundaries in a way that only photographic interpretation can:



“The Earliest Portrait of Abraham Lincoln,” *McClure's*, November 1895.

It seems almost impossible to conceive of this as the face of a man to be at the head of affairs when one of the greatest wars known to history was in progress, and who could push unflinchingly the measures necessary to bring that war to a successful end. Had it been merely a war of conquest, I think we can see in this face qualities that would have been entirely inconsistent with such a course, and that would have rendered it to this man wholly impossible.¹³

Here Cooley actually argues that the war was not a war of conquest *precisely because the photograph does not reveal a man with such impulses*; as he puts it, “I think we can see in this face qualities that would have been entirely inconsistent with such a course.” Cooley not only uses the photograph to articulate a vision of Lincoln as the “savior of the Union” (a popular char-

acterization of him at the time), he actually suggests that the photograph itself serves as evidence about the morality of the Civil War—even though it was made nearly twenty years before that conflict began.

It is difficult for a twenty-first century viewer to understand exactly how someone could claim that a single, simple photographic portrait—even a portrait of a figure so iconic as Abraham Lincoln—could possibly offer evidence of the justice and morality of the nation's most significant conflict. Yet this was precisely Cooley's claim. Collectively, the letter writers interpreted the *McClure's* Lincoln not just in terms of Lincoln's appearance, or even of what that appearance seemed to suggest about his emotional life, but as a window into the character of Lincoln himself and, by extension, into the character of the American nation. As I explain in more detail below, such responses, offered as they were by some of the era's intellectual elite, were grounded in readers' cultural knowledge of photography, portraiture, and “scientific” discourses of character such as physiognomy. Armed with what I call a physiognomic image of photography, the *McClure's* letter writers discussed the photograph not as a material object of history but as a vehicle for moral education and as a locus of “ideal” American identity.¹⁴

To most scholars of politics and rhetoric, the story of the *McClure's* Lincoln is probably nothing more than an interesting footnote to history. Yet I

want to suggest that the public conversation *McClure's* created when it published the photographs and responses is much more important than that. If we explore the discourse surrounding the *McClure's* Lincoln, we begin to understand more deeply the underappreciated role that photography has historically played in American political rhetoric. In the book project on which I am working this year at the Warren Center, I am attempting to do just that by analyzing how Americans have used their public talk about photographs like the *McClure's* Lincoln to craft political arguments. Using case studies that span from the 1890s to the 1930s, I argue that Americans have defined themselves and others in and through their public talk about photography. By framing photography as a locus of rhetorical engagement about social and political values, I am attempting to construct a history of photography that shows how Americans have used words about images to participate in the politics of their day.

All of this is why I am thrilled to be spending this year at the Warren Center. I first found out about the “Between Word and Image” seminar when a colleague came across the call for applications and forwarded it to me. At the top, she wrote: “BETWEEN WORD AND IMAGE ... LIES YOUR WORK!!!” While the punctuation was a bit hyperbolic, she was right about the fit. My scholarship has consistently addressed aspects of the relationships between word and

image. As a communication historian, I am interested in analyzing what happens when we introduce questions of visuality into our histories and theories of political rhetoric. In both my historical-critical scholarship, as well as in my theoretical work, I have sought to challenge the tendency to fetishize talk and text as the best and most “democratic” modes of political discourse within rhetorical studies of politics. Such a perspective is perhaps most vividly represented in the remarks of John Dewey, who famously proclaimed in *The Public and Its Problems* that “vision is a spectator, hearing is a participator.”¹⁵ Rather than treating the visual as passive at best or as a danger to “rational” communication at worst, I want to analyze the role of visuality in political discourse without automatically marking its presence as problematic. For example, my first book, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), studied the circulation of U.S. government-sponsored documentary photographs in three different Depression-era magazines. In elaborating the ways that the Farm Security Administration's photographs were combined with text to visualize poverty, I worked “between word and image” to account for the important role that the circulation of the photographs played in public deliberation about poverty during the Depression.

This year's seminar brings together a diverse group of scholars from multiple fields (including philosophy, commu-

nication, English, history, education, and religious studies), all of whom are working, in one way or another, “between word and image.” There are any number of ways to parse this complex and wonderfully ambiguous phrase. *Word* might mean *text*, but it could just as easily mean *speech* or a broader sense of *language*. *Image* might mean *picture*, but it could just as easily mean *mental representation* or a broader sense of *visuality*. And then there's the matter of *between*. *Between* might be interpreted spatially, as in the existence of a domain of word and a domain of image, and thus as a space overlap that we want to explore. Another connotation of *between* might be more antagonistic or, at the very least, agonistic; here, the sense of people who have “bad blood between them” comes to mind, making the phrase something more like *word versus image*. Based upon our discussions in our weekly

“Tousled hair” portrait; print based on 1857 photograph by Alexander Hesler, Indiana Historical Society.



seminar meetings, I think that as a group we have emerged with a third, more useful sense of *between*. This is the one that emerges when you see two people who insist that they are “just friends,” but of whom, after observing them, you cannot help but think, “I wonder if there's something *between* those two?” This sense of *between* is more dynamic than an empty, static sense of space and more open than a frame of conflict. Instead it is a *between* of motion, of energy, of kinesis, of that spark that happens when two people create something that didn't exist when they were separate. While each of us in the seminar is working with our own senses of *word* and *image*, I think that it is this kinetic sense of *between* that has come to animate all of our individual projects. The result of our readings, conversations, and sharing of works-in-progress has been an incredibly fruitful, broad, and sustained year-long conversation about the dynamic relationships that emerge between word and image.

When I initially proposed my project for this fellowship, I was thinking of word and image in perhaps their most obvious senses: word as text and image as photograph. Largely as a result of our discussions, I have come to embrace a different sense of “image” as well. I have realized that those who responded to photographs like the *McClure's* Lincoln were not only offering words about an image, they were also constructing an image of photography itself—and it was this image of photography

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that shaped their political arguments. Recall that the letter writers grounded their arguments in the assumption that there was a direct correspondence between Lincoln's image and his “natural traits”—between, as General Walker so tellingly put it, “Mr. Lincoln's face and his mind and character.” In making such seemingly bold claims, *McClure's* readers were actually mobilizing an image of photography that was quite familiar to them in the late nineteenth century: they had been taught by popular, culturally ubiquitous nineteenth-century-discourses of physiognomy and phrenology that there was a direct relationship between photographic portraits and the characters of their subjects.

In the nineteenth century, portraits were thought to be ekphrastic—that is, they were believed to reveal or to “bring before the eyes” (the literal translation of *ekphrasis*) something vital and almost mysterious about their subjects.¹⁶ It was assumed that the *photographic* portrait, in particular, did not merely “illustrate” a person but also constituted an important locus of information about human character. Portraits taught common people about the virtues of the elites and warned them against the danger of vice; thus portraits were thought to educate the masses about what it meant to be a virtuous citizen. Such education was possible because of the connection between portrait photography and “scientific” discourses such as phrenology and physiognomy, which connected physical attributes to moral and intellectual capacities. Throughout the nineteenth

century, “the practice of reading faces” was a key part of everyday life and remained so into the early twentieth century.¹⁷ Conceived in the late eighteenth century by Johann Caspar Lavater and popularized in the United States and Europe in the nineteenth century, physiognomy involved paying attention to “the minuteness and the particularity” of physical details and made analogies between those details and the character traits they were said to illustrate.¹⁸ The practices of phrenology and physiognomy were not parlor-game fun; indeed, not many more steps were necessary for a full-blown discourse of eugenics.¹⁹ These sciences of moral character enabled anxious Americans, especially those of the middle and upper classes, to use a language that placed themselves and marginalized others in “proper relation.” What we might call the physiognomic image of photography, then, was rhetorically available to late nineteenth-century Americans who wanted to use photography to define those who were “real Americans” and those whose physiognomy revealed them to be dangerous threats to a “pure” American identity.

Turning back now to the letters about the *McClure's* Lincoln, we may see more clearly how this physiognomic image of photography worked. In addition to commenting on Lincoln's character and affect, as we saw above, several letter writers took those arguments further to suggest that the Lincoln photograph revealed him as a distinctly American type—a “new man” whose physiognomy indi-

cated a new stage in American characterological development. One of those who wrote to *McClure's* in response to the photograph was Truman H. (T. H.) Bartlett, identified by editors as an “eminent sculptor, who has for many years collected portraits of Lincoln, and has made a scientific study of Lincoln's physiognomy.” In his letter to *McClure's*, Bartlett observed that the photograph suggested the rise of a “new man”:

It may to many suggest other heads, but a short study of it establishes its distinctive originality in every respect. It's priceless, every way, and copies of it ought to be in the glad possession of every lover of Lincoln. Handsome is not enough—it's great—not only of a great man, but the first picture representing the only new physiognomy of which we have any correct knowledge contributed by the New World to the ethnographic consideration of mankind.²⁰

Setting aside Bartlett's somewhat tortured prose, we see that, for Bartlett, Lincoln's physical features signaled not just a distinctive and moral character, as other letter writers had argued, but an actual and marked shift in the social and cultural makeup of the American man. While some might be content to tie the image to “other heads,” as Bartlett so vividly puts it, Bartlett suggested that the “distinctive originality” of Lincoln's features signaled something entirely new. For Bartlett, the photograph of Lincoln was important not only because it revealed a “great” American, but

also because it revealed a portrait of a “new” American character.

I argued above that the public conversation about the *McClure's* Lincoln should not be dismissed as an historical curiosity, but rather it should be studied as an important instance of political rhetoric. Embracing the responses to the *McClure's* Lincoln as political rhetoric means that we must do more than identify the physiognomic image of photography constructed in the comments about the photograph; we need also to consider what political work the image was being made to do in the context of its publication and circulation in 1895. Put another way, why was it so vital for the *McClure's* letter writers to say all of these things about Lincoln in the first place? Answers to this question are too lengthy to consider here, but in general I believe that the impulse to mobilize the physiognomic image of photography in discussions of the *McClure's* Lincoln may be traced to cultural anxieties about the changing character of the American citizenry at the end of the nineteenth century. As a number of historians have observed, elites existed in a perpetual state of anxiety during the Gilded Age.²¹ Many causes have been posited for this cultural “neurasthenia”²²; one of them was confusion about what it meant to be an American. Historian T.J. Jackson Lears observes that the political and social upheaval of the period (immigration, labor disputes, and anarchism, for example) was coupled with a broader cultural anxiety about the potential “degeneracy” of the “Anglo-Saxon” race; statisti-

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cians warned that “Anglo-Saxons were being replaced by inferior immigrant stock,” and immigration rhetoric was dominated by racist rhetorics of biological essentialism.²³ Anxious elites also sought to rhetorically dissociate activist citizens from the identity of “American.” After the incident at Haymarket Square in Chicago in 1886, for example, one newspaper editorial pronounced: “The enemy forces are not American [but] rag-tag and bob-tail cutthroats of Beelzebub from the Rhine, the Danube, the Vistula and the Elbe.”²⁴ During these years, eugenics discourse reached down from the rarified universe of science into the everyday lives of Americans, where it emphasized the importance of retaining a “pure” American identity in the face of the “threat” of the blending of the races.²⁵ Attempts to grapple with the confusions of their age, then, likely prompted elites to enlist Lincoln in their rhetorical battle. Of such appropriations of Lincoln, Barry Schwartz writes: “Lincoln was not elevated ... because the people had discovered new facts about him, but because they had discovered new facts about themselves, and regarded him as the perfect vehicle for giving these tangible expression.”²⁶ To this apt characterization I would only add that it was photography—or, more specifically, the image of photography—that transformed Lincoln into that “perfect vehicle.”

Notes

¹Charles Hamilton and Lloyd Ostendorf note that there are over one hundred extant photographs of Lincoln; more than fifty made before he became President, and more than sixty taken during his presidency. See Charles Hamilton and Lloyd Ostendorf, *Lincoln in Photographs: An Album of Every Known Pose* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), ix-x. The daguerreotype which was photographed and then reproduced in *McClure's* is now in the collection of the Library of Congress.

²Barry Schwartz has traced references to both Lincoln and Washington in newspapers and in the *Congressional Record* from roughly 1865-1920. He found that references to Lincoln markedly increased after 1900, and soon thereafter, surpassed references to Washington. See Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 57-58; 78; 110-113. See also Marcus Cunliffe, “The Doubled Images of Lincoln and Washington,” in *Gettysburg College*, 26th Annual Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture (Gettysburg College, PA, 1988), 7-34; Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 27-29.

³The “tousled hair” photograph was widely (and, to some, embarrassingly) circulated after Lincoln's senate nomination. Of the photograph, Lincoln later wrote to a friend that he thought the photograph was “a very true one; though my wife and many others do not. My impression is that their objection arises from the disordered condition of the hair.” See Hamilton and Ostendorf, *Lincoln in Photographs*, 6-7.

⁴Qtd. in Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 152.

⁵“The Earliest Portrait of Lincoln: Letters in Regard to the Frontispiece of

the November *McClure's*,” *McClure's*, December 1895, 111.

⁶“The Earliest Portrait,” 112.

⁷*Ibid.*, 110.

⁸*Ibid.*, 111.

⁹*Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁰“Miss Tarbell's Life of Lincoln,” *McClure's*, January 1886, 206-207.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 207.

¹²“The Earliest Portrait,” 112.

¹³*Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁴Of the first set of twelve letters published in the December 1895 *McClure's*, four are from members of the legal profession (including Supreme Court justices), five are from academics, and two are from newspaper editors. The magazine's founder and editor, Sam McClure, most likely sent advance copies of the photograph to members of the eastern political and scholarly establishment. Many correspondents began their letters by thanking McClure for sending an advance copy of the image; for example, C.R. Miller, editor of the *New York Times*, wrote on October 24th, “I thank you for the privilege you have given me of looking over some of the text and illustrations of your new Life of Lincoln” (“The Earliest Portrait,” 111).

¹⁵John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1927/1954), 219. See also Cara A. Finnegan and Jiyeon Kang, “Sighting the Public: Iconoclasm and Public Sphere Theory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90 (November 2004): 377-402.

¹⁶On the rhetoric of portrait photographs see Graham Clarke, ed., *The Portrait in Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992).

¹⁷Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 16.

¹⁸Lucy Hartley, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cam-

bridge University Press, 2001), 127.

¹⁹On the rhetoric of eugenics in the twentieth century, see Marouf Arif Hasian, Jr., *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

²⁰“Miss Tarbell's,” 207.

²¹See, for example, T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); and Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

²²On neurasthenia, see Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 47-54; Trachtenberg, *Incorporation*, 47-48.

²³Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 29-30. See also Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 116-117.

²⁴Qtd. in Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 29.

²⁵Qtd. in Smith, *American Archives*, 125.

²⁶Barry Schwartz, “The Reconstruction of Abraham Lincoln,” in *Collective Remembering*, eds. David Middleton and Derek Edwards (London: Sage, 1990), 101.

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Why the Death of Comparative Literature is a Defeat for the Humanities

By Helmut Walser Smith

“Comparative literature,” the American Association for Comparative Literature tells us, “promotes the study of intercultural relations that cross national boundaries, multicultural relations within a particular society, and the interactions between literature and other forms of human activity, including the arts, the sciences, philosophy, and cultural artifacts of all kinds.” Literature appears but once in this definition—as a term to be understood relationally. Culture, by contrast, is mentioned three times, but it never stands on its own feet. Twice, the prefixes “inter” and “multi” provide the term with a sleeker sheen, and once it qualifies the surreptitiously materialist term “artifacts.”

We are here a long ways from Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* and from a sense that humanistic study is about the best that has been thought and known. More worrying is the distance from the Herderian impulse to collect and gather the literatures of the world and to oppose the myopia of one’s own culture with a wide and deep sense of the literary expressions of other people’s speaking and writing in a range of languages. For Johann Gottfried Herder, writing in the late eighteenth century, there was “no *Favoritvolk*.” Precisely, the diversity of language and literature precluded the narrowness of national thinking. But as a cosmopolitan and a humanist, he exclaimed against the wind of history. The subsequent period witnessed the division of the world into nations and empires, each with its own manifest destiny; in the nineteenth century,

national literatures crystallized and, with them, the specialized disciplines that ordered and shaped national literatures, canonizing literary works in the measure that they expressed national identity. It is against this clamoring, unsubtle concert of “*Favoritvölker*” that the aged Goethe first coined the term *Weltliteratur*. Fascinated by the fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafez, Goethe believed that world literature would someday replace national literature as the cultural reference point of educated citizens.

The tension between the literature of the world and the literature of the nation is at the heart of the challenge of comparative literature. In institutional terms, however, the literature of the nation has emerged victorious. North American universities sport large, robust departments of English (increasingly focused on American literature) and small, but still thriving, departments of select foreign literatures—French, German, Italian, and Spanish. Russian literature, despite its monumental literary tradition, struggles. Hebrew and Yiddish remain stable, but for how long? And what of Chinese literature? Or of the Persian literature Goethe so admired? The discipline of English drew from the efforts to define the national literary tradition—it drew from the “essential Englishness,” as F. R. Leavis put it, of Milton and Shakespeare. But who was to speak for the other languages and literatures?

Granted, comparative literature did not make life easy for itself. Penned in 1877 by Hugo Metzl de Lomnitz, a Rumanian nobleman, the discipline’s first

programmatic statement suggested that an adequate understanding of comparative literature required eleven languages, including German, English, French, Icelandic, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Swedish, Spanish, and Hungarian, with Latin and Greek not counting since they could be assumed. If the list was Eurocentric, the method centered on contrast, and contrast—whether Montesquieu’s *lettres persiennes* or Madame de Staël’s *De l’Allemagne*—tells about the self in a different way. Moreover, early comparative literature developed not at the center of Europe but at its eastern margins, in places like the University of Cluj (Kolozsvar), now in Rumania, where de Lomnitz taught, or in Istanbul, where Erich Auerbach conceived and wrote *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. As Auerbach’s masterpiece counts as the founding exemplar of comparative literature in the United States, it has acquired myths of heroic proportions. Auerbach, the story has it, composed the book in Istanbul without the aid of a library—an achievement of the European mind in exile, forcibly stripped of place or context. As Kader Konuk, a scholar at the University of Michigan has shown, the legend is not entirely accurate. Auerbach wrote his great work with access to the significant holdings of the University of Istanbul, and he was strongly influenced by the specific context of the history of Turkey—a country then suspended between its own traditions and its Europeanizing impulse.

Comparative literature then flourished in the United States,

where its great teachers were scholars who fled the shatter-zones of Europe’s nationalist and revolutionary politics. But even in the United States it soon fell into crisis. In the early sixties, René Wellek began to sound this note, admonishing the discipline against variants of French poststructuralism. As it turns out, poststructuralism introduced a second golden age to comparative literature, with the influence of Derrida and Foucault paramount, and the discipline turned on brilliant deconstructive readings, a theoretical language of its own, and an intellectual pull (especially on younger scholars) that the national literatures could not easily match. It helps to recall this moment in the mid-eighties (if only to realize how recently and precipitously the discipline has since fallen) when a genuine theoretical burst emanated from comparative literature programs.

Yet comparative literature could not place its Ph.D. students. Tenure-track lines remained the prerogatives of national literatures, and, as university budgets constricted, hiring slowed and the crisis turned existential, with many of the best students leaving the field. Some of the young scholars landed in departments focusing on national literatures and retained a measure of their comparative training, but the discipline went adrift. By the late eighties, deconstruction lost its *avant-garde* lustre, and the controversy around Paul de Man, who had kept secret his anti-Semitic wartime writing, further undermined the status of the field’s investment in poststructuralist theory. In 1993, the

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American Association for Comparative Literature issued its so-called Bernheim Report, an outline for future research that was remarkable for its lack of attention to the literary. “The term ‘literature,’” the Report averred, “may no longer adequately describe our object of study.” Instead, comparative literature, as far as its governing body could set an agenda, became a border-crossing discipline—one that crossed into the textual and visual world beyond literature and toward non-literary methods deriving from history, philosophy, cultural anthropology, and media studies.

Ten years later, disciplinary soul-searching centers again on literature, with Herder as a guide and with *Weltliteratur* as a possibility. But now the situation is more urgent, with prominent authors like Gayatri Spivak talking about the death, not merely the crisis, of comparative literature. Programs at Research I universities have folded—and many have been folded into English departments, despite the latter’s monolingualism. Others have become part of a literature major, or an arm of cultural studies (whose affinity to identity politics make it no less monolingual than English departments). Some comparative literature programs continue to thrive; others confirm Spivak’s fears.

What is the consequence? Disciplines have died before. Who now studies comparative anatomy, folklore, or geography (even if the latter has become intellectually central again)? But the death of comparative literature, should it come to pass, brings with it an irreparable loss

to the humanities. And this loss has to do with how we study the world.

In the age of sound bites and of Fox News, universities belong to a collection of the few sites in the United States where people take foreign cultures seriously. Homes to international scholars, universities also house specialists in history, literature, philosophy, and the social sciences whose jobs are to understand other places. How to organize these scholars is a question no smaller than the question of how American universities should organize their knowledge of the world. Area studies, a creation of the Cold War, is one way to group this knowledge, with departments or programs bringing together specialists who share knowledge about place. In keeping with their Cold War origins, area studies programs have been traditional preservers of political science, especially as that discipline has turned away from prizing local knowledge in favor of higher levels of abstraction. Conceivably, however, comparative literature could infuse area studies with a more decidedly humanistic bent, which, in this context, means a pronounced emphasis on the literary and a renewed attention to the linguistic realms. This is the solution proposed by Spivak, who sees an alliance of comparative literature and area studies as mutually beneficial. Yet this solution ends by placing the literature of non-European languages in a non-literary field, much as museum curators used to place African art in the ethnology section, separate from the work of European masters.

But if we believe, as Herder

did, that literature represents a privileged road to understanding other cultures—and if we imagine that not just our own literature but the literature of the world matters, as Goethe did—then it is necessary to establish a disciplinary base in the humanities from which the understanding of foreign-language literature can proceed. Comparative literature, with its emphasis on literature in many languages, once provided that base, even though, in practice, it often remained tied to a comparison of major European literatures. Yet its origins and much of its history point elsewhere, not to Berlin or to Paris, but to Cluj and to Istanbul—to the crossroads of continents and to scholars whose *vitas* were marked by the forced routes of displacement. Erasmus, peripatetic patron of the humanities, famously said “home is where my library is.” When Auerbach wrote *Mimesis*, Istanbul was his home, and this home suggests the importance, now, of comparative literature in a broader sense. That broad sense simply asserts, as Auerbach’s University of Istanbul predecessor Leo Spitzer put it, “the power of the human mind of investigating the human mind.” In a precise sense, it entails close reading of texts—both in English and in other languages. The focus on the literary and on reading literarily cannot, contra the Bernheim Report and the ASCL definition cited at the outset, be incidental; it is what constitutes and differentiates the discipline and enables a particular kind of understanding across cultures. This understanding is philological—an understanding based on

the love of words and on the imperatives of deep reading. But it also focuses on translation—sometimes literally word for word, sentence for sentence, and sometimes in the figurative sense of bringing the imaginative expression of one culture into contact, relation, and dialogue with another. This emphasis on translation, however imperfect a science it remains, ties comparative literature to the departments of foreign languages and literatures—for these are the departments in our universities where the understanding of foreign places via languages not our own is most tenaciously defended. English, as a department or as a world language, has not overcome the problem of Babel, a fact for which we might be grateful. At the core of the humanities there remains the problem of reaching across linguistic barriers, and, in literature, this entails a reaching to world literature *qua* literature. This is a Herderian quest, and it requires institutional support. There is no doubt, as Katie Trumpener has put it, that we are “not fully adequate to the task”—but, as she also asks, “if not us, who? And if not now, when?”

Further readings:

Edward W. Said. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York, 2004).

Haun Saussy, ed. *Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization* (Baltimore, 2006).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Death of a Discipline* (New York, 2003).

What We Are Writing

What books are our colleagues across the campus writing and editing? *LETTERS* has asked Vanderbilt University's humanities departments to share their faculty members' 2006 publications. Their answers give us a glimpse into an active and diverse scholarly community.

Vereen Bell, editor. *A Garland of Many Years* (Poems by Donald Davie; photographs by Doreen Davie). Vanderbilt University Press.

Vereen Bell. *Yeats and the Logic of Formalism*. University of Missouri Press.

Michael Bess. *Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II*. Knopf.

William Caferro. *John Hawkwood: An English Mercenary in Fourteenth-Century Italy*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Sara Eigen and Mark Larri-more, editors. *The German Invention of Race*. State University of New York Press.

Edward H. Friedman. *Cervantes in the Middle: Realism and Reality in the Spanish Novel*. Juan de la Cuesta.

Sean X. Goudie. *Creole America: The West Indies and the Formation of Literature and Culture in the New Republic*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Barbara Hahn and Marie Luise Knott, editors. *Hannah Arendt—Von den Dichtern erwarten wir Wahrheit*. Matthes and Seitz.

Barbara Hahn, editor. *Im Nachvollzug des Geschriebenseins. Literaturtheorie nach 1945*. Koeningshausen und Neumann.

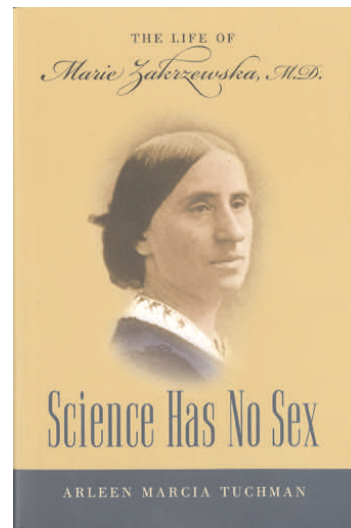
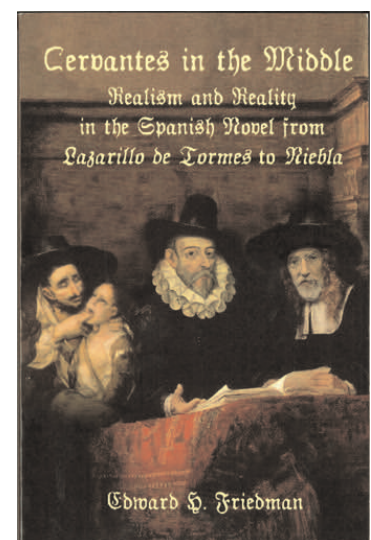
Rick Hillis. *Brother Salvage*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Gary Jensen. *The Path of the Devil: A Study of Early Modern Witch Hunts*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Jane Landers and Barry Robinson, editors. *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America*. University of New Mexico Press.

Lorraine Lopez. *Call Me Henri*. Curbsstone Press.

Leah S. Marcus, editor. *The Norton Critical Edition of*



Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice. W. W. Norton and Company.

John A. McCarthy. *Remapping Reality: Chaos and Creativity in Science and Literature (Goethe—Nietzsche—Grass)*. Rodopi Publishers.

Richard McGregor and Adam Sabra, editors. *The Development of Sufism in Mamluk Egypt*. Institut Francais d'Archeologie Orientale.

José Medina. *Speaking From Elsewhere*. State University of New York Press.

Urs Meyer, Roberto Simanowski, and Christoph Zeller, editors. *Transmedialität. Zur Ästhetik paraliterarischer Verfahren*. Wallstein.

Roosevelt L. Noble. *Black Rage in the American Prison System*. LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC.

Alice Randall, Carter Little, and Courtney Little. *My Country Roots: The Ultimate MP3 Guide to America's Original Outsider Music*. Naked Ink.

Philip D. Rasico. *El Català Antic*. Universitat de Girona / Institut de Llengua i Cultura Catalanes.

Cecelia Tichi and Amy S. Lang, editors. *What Democracy Looks Like: A New Critical Realism for the Post-Seattle World*. Rutgers University Press.

Benigno Trigo. *Remembering Maternal Bodies: Melancholy in Latina and Latin American Women's Writing*. Palgrave Macmillan.

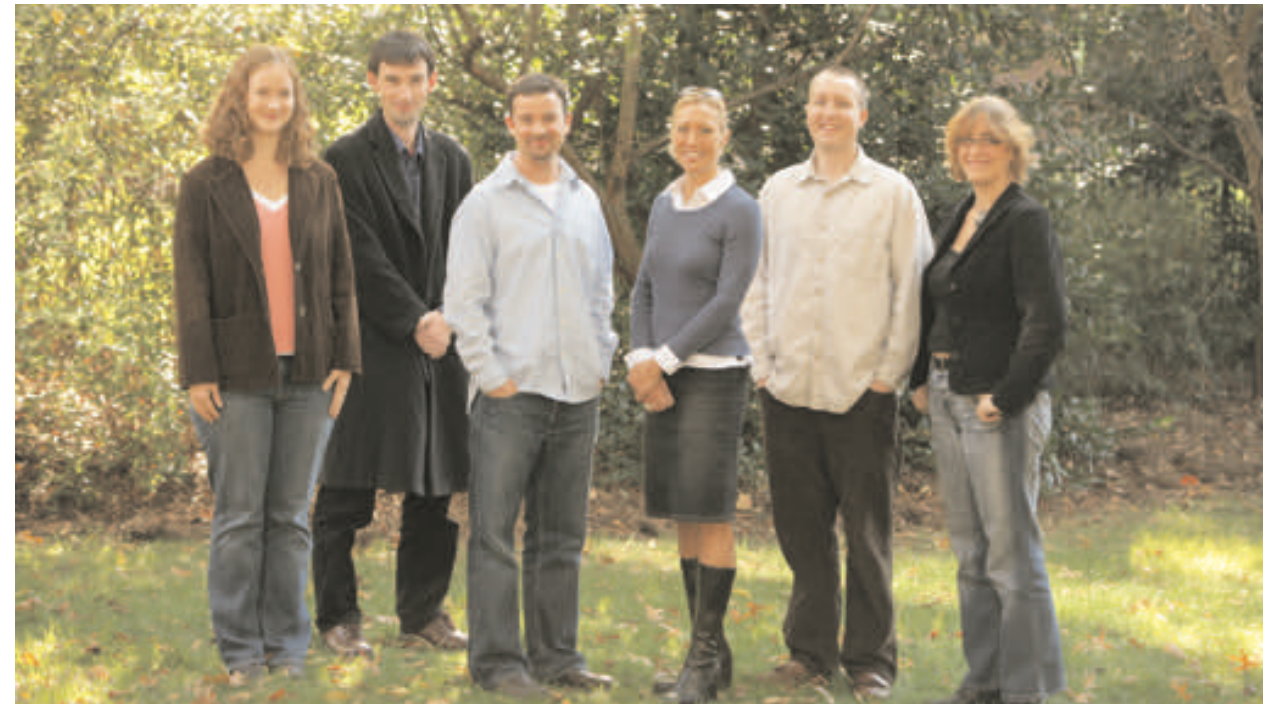
Arleen Marcia Tuchman. *Science Has No Sex: The Life of Marie Zakrzewska, M.D.* University of North Carolina Press.

Abraham Wasserstein and David J. Wasserstein. *The Legend of the Septuagint: From Classical Antiquity to Today*. Cambridge University Press.

Mark Wollaeger. *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative From 1900 to 1945*. Princeton University Press.

Paul Young. *The Cinema Dreams Its Rivals: Media Fantasy Films From Radio to the Internet*. University of Minnesota Press.

2006-2007 Warren Center Graduate Student Fellows



From left: LeeAnn Reynolds, Tim Boyd, Brian Rabinovitz, Lisa Battaglia, David Richter, Carola Daffner.

2006-2007 Warren Center Fellows



From left, front row: Cara Finnegan, Kevin Leander, Ellen Levy, Carolyn Dever; back row: Richard McGregor, Paul Young, Gregg Horowitz, Robin Jensen, Teresa Goddu. Not pictured: Catherine Molineux.

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Statement of Purpose

Established under the sponsorship of the College of Arts and Science in 1987 and renamed the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities in 1989 in honor of Robert Penn Warren, Vanderbilt alumnus class of 1925, the Center promotes interdisciplinary research and study in the humanities, social sciences, and, when appropriate, natural sciences. Members of the

Vanderbilt community representing a wide variety of specializations take part in the Warren Center's programs, which are designed to intensify and increase interdisciplinary discussion of academic, social, and cultural issues.

Vanderbilt University is committed to principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action.

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Closing the Achievement Gap: A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Erase

By Donna Y. Ford and Gilman W. Whiting

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

—GEORGE SANTAYANA

It is widely recognized and quite unfortunate that the educational experiences of African American students in our public schools are unique. Specifically, African Americans have been the only group systematically and legally denied the right to an education. The educational malady of the past three decades, more commonly known as “the achievement gap,” has deep and pervasive roots in history. Three landmark legal cases set the stage for what we today call the achievement gap. The first was *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. In 1856, the court ruled that a black man, his wife, and his children were not “citizens” of the United States and, thereby, could not benefit from the Constitution. In this document, the terms “people of the United States” and “citizens” were synonymous. All that these terms embodied is important because this decision was law until after the Civil War, and the decision carried with it far-reaching educational implications.

In 1895, African American spokesman and leader Booker T. Washington, in his “Atlanta Compromise Speech,” set the stage for another solidification of the gap. While presenting at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, he quietly soothed racist southerners about the “uppity” blacks while simultaneously soothing the worried northerners whom the south was attempting to impress. Washington assured

those in attendance, and around the United States, that “it is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top”; his most noted line, which set the stage for continued inequities, read: “In all things social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” This sentence was viewed to be a legal agreement of the separation of Black and White. He went on to urge the south toward beneficence, later stating that “the laws of changeless justice bind oppressor with oppressed.” Less than one year later, such thinking was reaffirmed as gaps were legally concretized in areas such as housing, employment, and medical treatment. That is, in 1896, some thirty odd years after the Emancipation Proclamation, a second landmark case directly legalized the various black-white gaps. A case in point: in 1892, sixty-three years before Rosa Parks’s refusal to give her seat to a white man, Homer Plessy was jailed for sitting in the “white” car of the East Louisiana Railroad. The case, *Homer Adolph Plessy v. The State of Louisiana*, known to most as “Plessy v. Ferguson,” concretized the notion of separate but equal.

Keeping this timeline in mind, we see that separate but equal was legally acceptable only one hundred years ago; further, it was less than fifty-five years ago that legislation passed to desegregate education in the landmark *Brown v. Board of*

Education (1954). In other words, legal and moral efforts to secure equity and excellence in the education of African American students have relatively short histories. Given that blacks were relegated to subhuman status in many ways, there was little moral outrage regarding segregated and unequal schools prior to *Brown*. In 2006, we see justifiable frustration and anger, but the moral outrage is weak—virtually non-existent.

Why ought moral outrage exist regarding the achievement gap? Several decades of student achievement data consistently shows that some groups of students score far below other groups, and it documents an inverse relationship between race and achievement. When a group of students consistently experiences negative school outcomes, the chances of its members leading fulfilling lives are diminished; the opportunities to be contributing members of this nation are compromised. The United Negro College Fund says it best: “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” A mind is also a terrible thing to erase. When black and Latino children are miseducated, their gifts and talents are likely to atrophy, and all of America suffers.

There is no singular achievement gap; the achievement gap has many faces. These various gaps both individually and collectively contribute to minority students excelling less than white students relative to grades,

test scores, and graduation rates. In essence, the omnibus “achievement gap” is a *symptom* of many other gaps, such as gaps in funding, resources, teacher quality, curriculum, family involvement, and expectations. The achievement gap starts at home, before children begin school, and then widens during the formal school years. For example, at the kindergarten level, there tends to be a one-year gap between black and white students; by the twelfth grade, it often becomes a four-year gap. It is counterintuitive that the gap *widens* while students are in school, yet seventeen-year-old black students tend to have the reading levels of thirteen-year-old white students. Whether we compare the achievement gap at the district, state, or national levels, the gap exists. No school district—urban, suburban, or rural—can be excused from addressing this social, educational, and moral issue.

Borrowing from the work of Barton, we can explain the primary correlates of the achievement gap. Based on his review of several hundred studies, Barton identifies fourteen variables that consistently contribute to the achievement gap. We must thoroughly examine two contexts to understand the achievement gap in a comprehensive manner: (1) school and (2) before and beyond school. Six school-related correlates appear consistently in the achievement gap literature. Because most stu-

dents attend school for approximately thirteen years, these school correlates must be considered in terms of their cumulative impact.

Research consistently shows that a student’s academic achievement is heavily dependent upon the rigor of the curriculum; yet, the curriculum tends to be less rigorous for black and Latino students. For example, these two groups are less likely to (a) have substantial credits in academic sources at the end of high school and (b) participate in advanced placement and gifted education classes.

The importance of teacher quality on student achievement speaks for itself. Black and Latino students are more likely to be taught by teachers who are unqualified, including teachers who lack certification, out of field teachers, teachers with the fewest credentials, and teachers with the lowest test scores. Inexperienced teachers, those with less than three years of teaching experience, are more likely to teach in urban settings. In schools with high percentages of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, 21% of teachers have less than three years of experience; in schools with low CLD enrollment, 10% of teachers have less than three years of teaching.

In large classes, discipline and behavior problems are more likely. These issues detract from instructional time, hinder teachers’ abilities to personalize instruction, and leave little room for quality student-teacher interactions. In schools where there are high percentages of culturally diverse students, class sizes are

larger. For instance, in schools where CLD students represent 75% of the population, the average class size is thirty-one. In schools where CLD students are less than 10%, class size averages at twenty-two. Schools with higher percentages of CLD students are also less likely to have computers in the classrooms, Internet access, or updated, high-quality software; further, students in low-minority schools are given more assignments to conduct research on the Internet than students in high-minority schools.

Students cannot learn in unsafe, threatening environments. Black and Latino students more frequently report issues of classroom disruptions and of negative peer pressures (including gangs and fears about being attacked at school).

We recognize that schools alone did not create the gap, nor can they close it without support from families and the larger community. Eight additional correlates of the achievement gap, based in the home and community, must be addressed. To begin with, the extent to which parents spend quality time with their children varies by family composition. Being a sole caregiver with a low income depletes a parent’s time and resources. A larger percentage of black students (compared to white and Latino students) live in such homes. In addition, there are many negative consequences to changing schools, including lower reading and math achievement. Black and Latino students are twice as likely as white students to change schools.

The extent to which caregivers are involved in their children’s education affects students’ achievements and behaviors. However, black and Latino parents tend to participate less in their children’s educations than other parents. On a related correlate, parent-child reading positively affects language acquisition, literacy development, test scores, and achievement. Studies indicate that white students live in more literacy-enriched homes and are read to more often than black and Latino children.

Excessive television watching negatively affects students’ achievements, with students doing less homework and participating in fewer intellectually stimulating activities after school. Reports indicate that black and Latino students watch more television than white children.

It goes without saying that poor health and hunger are detrimental to achievement. Black and Latino households have two to three times the food insecurity and hunger than those of white students’. This affects another correlate—birth weight. Infants born with low birth weight begin life at a disadvantage that does not disappear. Thus, a disproportionate percentage of children born with low birth weight have long-term disabilities and impaired development as well as delayed social development. Black infants are two times more likely to be of a low birth weight than are white and Latino infants. In addition, lead poisoning plays a role. The primary source of lead poisoning among children is older homes with lead-based paint. Excessive levels of lead reduce

IQ and attention span, increase reading and learning disabilities, and increase behavioral problems. Black children are four times more likely to live in homes constructed prior to 1946 than are white and Latino children.

We must believe that closing the achievement gap is possible. If the aforementioned fourteen variables are the most powerful in contributing to, creating, and maintaining the gap, then it behooves us to address them in a systemic, comprehensive, and collaborative manner. Educators, families, community leaders, health professionals, and others must join forces to tackle this educational tragedy. Families and educators in K-12 settings cannot close the gap alone. Recognizing the intellectual and resource capital of our colleagues and students at Vanderbilt, we have created the Vanderbilt Achievement Gap Project. By working with the business community, families, and other universities, we can improve the quality of life for our culturally and linguistically diverse students. Change begins with courageous conversations, and thus we have developed the Achievement Gap seminar at the Warren Center.

Donna Y. Ford is a professor of special education and is the Betts Chair of education and human development at Peabody College. Gilman W. Whiting is a senior lecturer in the African American and diaspora studies program as well as the program’s director of undergraduate studies.



Fellows Organize Pre-Modern Race and Sexuality Symposium at Newberry Library

Members of the 2005-2006 Warren Center Fellows Program on "Pre-Modern Others: Race and Sexuality" are planning a one-day symposium to be held at the Newberry Library in Chicago on March 30, 2007. The symposium is co-sponsored by the library's Renaissance Consortium and by the Warren Center. The conference, entitled "Pre-Modern Race and Sexuality," will consist of four sessions:

Welcome

Leah S. Marcus, English, Vanderbilt University
Holly Tucker, French, Vanderbilt University

9:00 Opening Remarks by Houston Baker, English, Vanderbilt University

9:30-10:45 Session I: Race and Racism in the European Middle Ages

Speakers: David Nirenberg, Committee on Social Thought, University of Chicago
Geraldine Heng, English, University of Texas
Moderator: Lynn Ramey, French, Vanderbilt University

11:00-12:15 Session II: Issues in Pre-Modern Sexuality

Speakers: Dyan Elliott, History, Northwestern University
Katherine Crawford, History, Vanderbilt University
Moderator: Lynn Enterline, English, Vanderbilt University

1:30-2:45 Session III: Early Modern Race, Colonization, and the Americas

Speakers: Kim Hall, English, Fordham University
Carlos Jauregui, Spanish, Vanderbilt University
Moderator: Jean Feerick, English, Brown University

3:15-4:45 Session IV: Theorizing Race and Sexuality

Speakers: Jeffrey Masten, English, Northwestern University
Margo Hendricks, Literature, UC Santa Cruz
Francesca Royster, English, De Paul University
Moderator: Kathryn Schwarz, English, Vanderbilt University

4:45 Closing remarks by David Wasserstein, History, Vanderbilt University