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Colonialism and Ancient Rhetorics of the Non-Western World

2/10/2018

In this post, I will focus on the points of discussion from our class where we emphasized the complexities of accounting for colonialism in our research practices and methods, especially as it relates to ancient Indigenous communities of the Americas. I hope to complicate, without necessarily offering answers to, a variety of issues surrounding representation, experience, and expertise as they overlap in research methodologies. As such, I will focus on the collection *Rhetorics of the Americas: 3114 BCE to 2012 CE* edited by Damián Baca and Victor Villanueva, with a particular focus on the chapter “Practicing Methods in Ancient Cultural Rhetorics: Uncovering Rhetorical Action in Moche Burial Rituals” by Laurie Gries.

In her article Gries asks, “How then do we accurately recover nonverbal ancient rhetorical practices *on their own terms* if we do not have a society’s own “terms” to begin with?” (91). Different forms of this question became central to the conversation in our class as we discussed the collection *Rhetorics of the Americas*. While we did not necessarily focus on nonverbal rhetorical practices solely, we did spend a fair amount of time thinking about the effect of history on our ability to understand any form of rhetorical practice outside the Western world.

The reality of colonization, whether Spanish or British, complicated the process of thinking about non-Western rhetorical practices through the consistent devaluing of Indigenous ideologies and epistemologies—ways of knowing. The devaluation of Indigeneity that lies at the core of settler colonialism has continued into modern academe through what Damián Baca calls the “largely unquestioned dichotomy in higher education: that of ‘high’ and ‘low’ theory” (12). He notes that “high” theories, in Rhetoric and Composition specifically, are tied with the reading of rhetorical tradition mapped from the Classical Rhetoric of Athens to the Modern Rhetorical Theory of the United States. Such a reading embeds the West as “high” theory and everything beyond Western ways of knowing and thinking as “low” theory. It is this same dichotomy, born out of colonial enterprise, that complicates our ability to encounter ancient rhetorical practices, whether verbal or nonverbal, “*on their own terms.*”

Of course, access to ancient rhetorical practices of the Americas is complex in a variety of ways, not leastwise because of the plurality of different Indigenous groups and thus the plurality of rhetorical practices themselves. Furthermore, as we discussed in class, Indigenous communities have dealt with vast amounts of oppression at the hands of unethical anthropological and ethnographic research (this would certainly include Indigenous communities here in Milwaukee and around Wisconsin). This history requires an extremely cognizant approach, especially by researchers outside the communities in question. Finally, access becomes problematic when members of the tribal communities are no longer available to work alongside. Such is the problem faced by Gries in her exploration of ancient Moche burial procedures.

In order to work against this complication, Gries champions what we might call a materialist or new materialist approach to the nonverbal cultural artifacts of Moche burial chambers. She writes, “I argue that nonverbal artifacts have this same potential; if we listen close enough, these cultural artifacts speak to us and render the terms with which we can begin to uncover their rhetorical actions” (91). This approach, which focuses on the agency of nonhuman and nonanimal objects, has been critiqued in other iterations (i.e. the work of Ian Bogost and Levi

Bryant) for overwriting the peoples who have consistently borne the brunt of the violent de-humanizing tactics of colonialism. This complication with new materialist thought came out in our class discussion as we tried to puzzle through whether or not Gries's new materialist approach overwrites the Moche people who enacted rhetorical practices through nonverbal artifacts. While a new materialist approach seems intriguing and necessary in a lot of ways, I can't help but struggle with the implications for consistently marginalized groups at the hands of Westernization. Does giving these cultural artifacts such agency, as Gries does, actually undercut the agency of the Moche people? That is, do the artifacts themselves carry the connotations that actually inform us about the social, political, economic, and/or rhetorical complexities of the Moche people, or are we actually projecting a Western research methodology onto them even in our attempts to keep from doing so? Furthermore, precisely because Moche culture is no longer extant as such, is it possible to allow the artifacts to "speak to us" divorced from our Western expectations and understandings of rhetoric and rhetorical practices? Is it possible that this is a continued form of colonization via research practices?

--JC