Willamette University

Liberal Arts Research Collaborative

Student Presentations

Friday 9/12/2014 – Ford 122

Many poignant tensions arose for members of the National Council of Jewish Women, Portland Section in the latter decades of the 20th century as they navigated both their ambiguous relationships to racial minorities and their own complex racial identities. Even as their increasing acceptance into the white mainstream made them complicit in structural and institutional racism, they strove constantly to identify with and support people of color. Their highly active organization provides a window into the complexities of Jewish racialization – how a group of mostly upper-middle-class women of European descent can have a multifaceted, intersectional and ever-changing relationship with the social construction of race. My research explores the racial politics of the organization as well as the racial attitudes of its members, through oral histories and archival materials from 1960 to 2000, in order to shed light on Jewish racial identities in Oregon.

Saran Walker. Down the Rabbit Hole: Literary Legacy in the Digital Age (Advisor: Stephanie DeGooyer, English)

This project investigates digital media's effect on literary legacy, particularly since the rise of the Internet in the last few decades. The web not only allows niche interest groups to flourish, but also often caters to users' pre-established interests, allowing users to easily construct their own personalized digital bubbles. I argue that these features prolong and increase the relevancy of literary works when they are encountered or reinterpreted in a digital environment because those works are presented in a format that most appeals to the given user. Through an examination of web-based fan fiction and fan art, social media sites, and video games, I explore the ways people find customized means of interacting with literature digitally.

Dan Mehler. Simplexity: comprehending the relationship between societies and technologies (Advisor: Professor James Thompson, Art)

Arguably, an inquiry into the nature of the relationship between societies and technologies should inherently mandate the sort of discussion that is of the utmost complexity. Nevertheless, an emphasis on simplicity turned out to be the cornerstone of this project. Accordingly, while acknowledging the sheer complexity of the relationship between societies and technologies, I've utilized a dualistic approach to comprehending both the ways in which societies can instigate and perpetuate technological advancements, as well as the ways in which technological innovations can, in turn, significantly influence societal structures and designs. Hence, this discussion incorporates a vast array of carefully selected subtopics, ranging from a basic understanding of the some of the innate processes that are embedded into innovation and legislation, to an acknowledgement of the role of the market as a priori within the relationship, that operate as case studies for gathering insights regarding the intricate nature of this grander dynamic. Ergo, as this presentation follows the progression of the research process it will primarily focus on some of the more noteworthy findings and observations that arose from this investigation into the nature of the relationship between societies and the technologies they ultimately depend upon.

These works were completed as part of the Liberal Arts Research Collaborative and supported with generous funding from the Mellon Foundation.

Of the thousands of books, newspapers, magazines and pamphlets produced during the antebellum era, no form of literature is more overlooked in contemporary historiography than children’s abolitionist literature—but why? My research examines the development of children’s abolitionist literature as the product of both anti-slavery reforms and newly emerging conceptions of childhood during the early 19th century. A study of this genre reveals that the authors, publishers, and organizations involved in the production of this literature promoted specific themes which differed from other forms of anti-slavery literature. Therefore, my research analyzes the role of juvenile literature within the abolitionist movement as a whole, and ultimately, what the values promoted throughout these children’s stories tell us about the abolitionists themselves.


This project began as a proposal to draw ties between the early common school movement and Alexis de Tocqueville's visit to America. Over the course of the past six months it has transformed into a study of Horace Mann, the leader of Massachusetts education reform from 1837 to 1848. Through studying Mann's life and reforms, I found a crucial link with phrenology, the study of connection between brain shape and personality characteristics. By analyzing how phrenology was understood by Mann and his contemporaries, I show that it had wide influence as a philosophy. Then, I demonstrate how this philosophy permeated both Mann's personal life and educational reform goals.

Mele Ana Kastner. *The Puzzle of Harriet Martineau: Cosmopolitan Radical or Ethnocentric Racist?* (Advisor: Professor Richard Ellis, Politics)

Harriet Martineau is perhaps one of the most influential European thinks to have been ignored by history. Overshadowed by other political thinkers such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Martineau’s insights into society and civilization penetrated deeper into the true heart of the matter than others. Martineau was one of the founders of sociology as we know it. Her work, *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, is still the basis for how anthropologists and ethnographers conduct themselves in the field. She was a staunch abolitionist and a champion for women’s rights and religious tolerance. Yet for someone as radical as she, Martineau was a staunch supporter of Britain’s imperial policy. And despite her inclusive words and her belief in a common human heart, none of those beliefs stopped her from comparing Aborigines to apes, describing the native peoples of South Africa as clumsy and coarse, or limiting main characters in her stories to espousers of Western ideals. At first glance, it is easy to dismiss Martineau as another European with racist and narrow-minded views. However, that view is itself far too simple. Ironically, Martineau’s progressivism is what propels her to support the British Empire. Imperialism, in the eyes of Martineau and her progressive contemporaries, was the machine through which the rest of the world could gain the highest standard of living.

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My summer research investigates the relationship between a diverse group of New York abolitionists--Samuel Cornish, Lydia Maria Child, Frederick Douglass, and William Goodell and the presence of religious content in the anti-slavery newspapers each of them edited. Studying these newspapers and their editors illuminate three important ideas that further historians understanding of the abolitionist movement: the importance of religion as a tool to fight slavery, the press as an agent of abolitionist ideas, and the complex diversity that made this movement so unique and available to a variety of different people. My final project, a research paper, works to highlight the background and upbringings of these abolitionist newspaper editors and how their religious experiences played a part in their contribution to their newspapers and on a much larger scale, the entire abolitionist movement.