

21A.460J
Final Paper Topics
4-26-05

Papers are Due Thursday May 12th in class – no extensions are possible

In the second half of the course we have been focusing more explicitly on two paths of analysis as we continue to explore medicine, religion, and politics in the Afro-Atlantic: one path has focused upon the realm of illness, healing, and embodied experience and another has examined methodological approaches to knowing the “Other” in the former Zaire, Ghana, Niger, and Haiti. While these two trajectories are inextricably linked, an in-depth analysis of the study of social experience or the process of knowledge production involves different contexts of power, politics, and histories of social practice.

Please write 8-10 double spaced pages on one of the following two options:

1) In his discussion of medical pluralism, Paul Brodwin has claimed the following:

[T]he contest for healing power is both a product of past political struggles and a crucible for emerging forms of identity and collective action. People’s short-term maneuvers in the face of illness thus reproduce and destabilize what appear as durable structures of healing power. From the actors’ perspective – that is, from the standpoint of people seeking treatment or becoming a healer themselves – competing forms of healing propose genuinely different accounts of the body and of personal identity and morality. However, healing practices also mediate – in palpable and immediately persuasive ways – between disorders in the body/self and the body politic (from the family to the village, nation, and global system) (Brodwin 1996: 16).

In your essay choose **three** of the following ethnographic cases: Zaire, Ghana, Niger, and Haiti. Describe each social, political, and historical context and debate to what extent the illness experience mediates between disorders in the body/self and the body politic as you define them. Is Brodwin correct when he states: “People’s short-term maneuvers in the face of illness thus reproduce and destabilize what appear as durable structures of healing power”? In your papers consider to what degree individuals are shaped or forever bound by the set of sensory practices, ways of knowing and experiencing the world, and conceptions of the social and cosmological order in a particular socio-political context. To what degree are “sensory orders” or the “habitus” capable of being transformed?

2) Paul Stoller has offered a radical critique of what he calls “ethnographic realism” a set of conventions of ethnographic field methods and styles of writing that “claim to depict the total ethnographic picture of a society” (1989: 49) and tend to be informed by the adoption of a position of distance between the anthropologist and those whom s/he studies. The ethnographies that such modes of analysis produce have often obscured the social relationships between self and “other,” and furthermore, “the people have little or no voice in what is usually third person narrative filled with anthropological jargon”

(*ibid.*: 49). Stoller argues, furthermore, that “like it or not, there is a direct relationship between the degree of the anthropologists’ subjective involvement and the forms they choose for their discourse. ... Once the anthropological writer has experienced ‘the inside’ or ‘the place where logic bites its own tail,’ the discourse of ethnographic realism is no longer completely adequate” (*ibid.*: 53-54).

In your essay choose **three** of the following anthropologists’ works – Janzen, Geurts, Stoller, Brodwin, or Fabian – and analyze the methodology that each chose to conduct their “fieldwork.” Discuss the aspect of social life, experience, or system of knowledge and practices that became the focus of their particular study. In each case, consider the merits and limitations of the process of “data gathering,” interpretation and analysis of ethnographic materials, and the resulting text that has been produced. What has been presented successfully and what may be missing from the accounts the author produces as a consequence of choosing a particular subject and method of research? Discuss whether the degree to which the ethnographer was “involved” or capable of experiencing the reality of the “other” (as presented in the text) shapes the knowledge that was produced about their particular ethnographic context or subject. Debate the extent to which an anthropologist’s experience of the “inside” of another cultural, sensory, or epistemological order produces convincing texts about the realities of other societies.

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